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BEYOND CAROUSEL

BRENDAN RITCHIE



FREMANTLE PRESS

1

We've been holed up in a mansion in the hills for more than a month now.

Too scared to go back down into the suburbs. Too embarrassed to run further eastward. We spend our days bobbing about in the pool and eating mandarins from the orchard, and our nights on the balconies keeping Chess from barking while the four of us watch the strange and epic lightshows in the distant city.

The house isn't powered like Carousel. Pretty much nowhere is. But it has a line of solar panels on the roof and two summers worth of power stored in the batteries. Enough for showers, air conditioning, pool filters – anything we want. Except for lights. Never any lights.

At night we shuffle the long hallways with tiny reading lights tucked into our belts and pockets, our voices hushed and careful against the manic drone of insects outside.

Lights are an unwelcome beacon in a city full of shadow. We had been drawn to them ourselves. At night in the suburbs. Lost and lonely and desperately craving answers.

The first place was a high school. A broken pathway of fluoros led us to a wing of buildings housing workshops

for art, jewellery and woodwork. Inside it was deserted and ramshackle. Furniture shifted around, rubbish on the floor. The adjoining cafeteria smashed open and decimated. Somebody had been sleeping and working in the art room by a cluster of spidery easels. All around were piles of striking yet discarded abstracts. We called out, searched the grounds, stayed there for the night and most of the next day. But nobody came.

Then there was the Chinese restaurant. Its red and yellow glow breaking through the darkness as we trudged northward to the airport. The dining area was clean. Just one table used out of the thirty or so on offer. On it were some pens, a pot of mouldy green tea and a waning stack of waiter dockets. Again, the kitchen had been emptied. All that remained were two giant sacks of rice, one labelled Nov–Dec, the other Jan–Feb. No mention of a year.

At a mini-mart we ran into the dogs. Pit bulls bred in the suburbs by pot dealers and revheads. Feral now, if they weren't before. Hammering along in silent, terrifying packs. Drawn to light and smell and anything that moved. Lizzy locked eyes with two of them at the front of the store. Not knowing any better, she was just about to kneel down and call them over when a third one came bombing out of the shadows, straight for her. She flinched and it knocked her sideways before thundering into the wall. Luckily it was dazed and Taylor and I could pull her inside before the other two arrived.

For two days we bunkered in the store while the Bulls, as Taylor called them, paced around outside. They didn't really bark, which made them creepy as hell. If you listened closely you could hear them grunt and wheeze as they ran. Otherwise it was just the scrape of their claws on concrete or the sudden smack and gurgle of dog on dog as a fight broke out and the hierarchy shifted.

Perth's missing bogans had a lot to answer for.

Eventually we left and kept moving towards the airport. It had been early morning when the Disappearance happened. It seemed like most of Perth had still been in their homes. Asleep or shuffling through bedrooms and kitchens in weekday morning stupor. We found flooded bathrooms, clothes laid out on beds, garage doors halfway open, coffee turned from black to white, then evaporated into grey sludge.

A scattering of shiftworkers and early risers had been caught outside. Their legacy was dappled across the city. From cars strewn wildly across highways and suburban streets – some gently awaiting traffic signals, others crunched into lampposts and bus stops – to sunrise bootcamp sessions where medicine balls lay suspended in shrine-like circles at parks and ovals. A rank of late-night taxis covered in bird shit like rocks blipping from a giant concrete ocean. A tradie's ute still waiting to order at a McDonald's drive-through. Kickboards drifting the sagging lanes of an outdoor pool.

It was Pompeii 2.0, sans the plaster casts.

The eastern suburbs were browned over and ticking hot with the first months of summer. We had tried to push-start a couple of cars but the batteries were too far gone and the petrol spoiled. A Corolla almost turned over with Lizzy behind the wheel. Taylor and I screamed in excitement as she rolled away from us, only to stall, hop forward, then crash into the neighbour's fence. We felt guilty and rode bikes after that.

Eventually we hit scrubland and what I hoped was the edge of the airport buffer zone. It may well have been, but the bush was swarming with the Bulls. Initially we thought we might be able to go around them. They seemed distracted, fighting over something. One of them stopped to look at us. Then another. When the third Bull turned we saw what it was on the ground beneath them. The shreds of denim. The dirty All Stars. The fleck of white and deep red.

They chased us relentlessly and would have caught us if not for the highway. It was wide and smooth and not covered in crap like the smaller roads. We geared up and it took us eastward. Eventually the Bulls dropped away. Their hulking frames turned to dots on the horizon. When the highway began an incline and trees started to appear, we realised we were headed into the hills.

‘Is this where your parents live?’ Lizzy had asked, carefully.

I had shaken my head, relieved that they were still a long way to the south.

Still we didn't stop. The airport gone from our thoughts. The safety and monotony of Carousel a million miles away. When the highway turned too steep we disembarked and pushed the bikes upward on foot. The bush closed in around us and we calmed a little. Sprawling mansions began to pop up on private driveways and alcoves. They hung on the hillside and peered westward to the city and ocean as Perth did its best impression of LA. We passed dozens of them before Taylor spotted solar panels on a roof and we found ourselves a new place to hide.

That night we had collapsed on the plush poolside furniture and woke to a cool westerly and clusters of mosquito bites at our ankles. The three of us froze when a shaggy patchwork border collie surfaced from behind the trees at our yawning. This time Lizzy did crouch down. The dog dipped his head and carefully considered the thinning indie rock star. Satisfied, he trotted over for the greatest pat of his life and has been by Lizzy's side ever since.

So there we were. Sheepish and ashamed at how quickly the outside world had sent us packing. We felt like spoilt teenagers, lasting just weeks in the real world before whimpering back to our cushy suburban lives. If we had grown up during our time in Carousel, it sure didn't feel like it anymore.

I dangled my legs in the pool we had spent days cleaning and watched the Finns in their latest routines. Lizzy on

a deckchair, reading some Hemingway from the mansion's slimline bookshelves. Jeans folded carefully at her ankles. A man-size pale-blue business shirt swallowing her waist and torso. Ray-Bans hiding her eyes as she flicked pages, often looking back on something she just read while she traced the squares on Chessboard's coat. The world alters irrevocably, yet Lizzy Finn still looks ready for a photoshoot.

Taylor was a different story. Powering through laps of the pool before stretching, as she did now, for a good hour on the warming pavers. Always preparing, building, thinking. Devising elaborate plans before silently changing her mind and making some more. It had taken her just months to sum up the cavernous confines of Carousel. Now she was trying to do the same for an entire city. Lizzy and I would catch her staring down at the sprawling, empty suburbs. Not looking, assessing. Tracing roads and highways. Tiny paths that looked safe and empty from a distance. Houses and buildings. Maybe some with food. Most probably without. Her gaze would often end looking north. Past the houses and the factories. Through the bushland and the roaming Bulls. To the dormant grey of the airport.

Less than a year ago we had seen an Air Canada plane coming in to land there. Its link to Taylor and Lizzy still felt tangible and strong. All of us wanted to survive whatever was happening. Maybe even escape it somehow. But more than that – we wanted to know what it was.

In a way there were answers all around us. In the

buildings that stood upright. Tired and empty, but otherwise unaffected. In the lack of bodies. The pockets of power still fuelling random places like Carousel and the mini-mart, but nowhere else. The fading signs of their inhabitants. The lightshow that swept out of the city every night. Beams and waves of beautiful light. Constructed, timed and simulated in a manner that could be considered art and nothing else.

And our time in Carousel. Rocky. Rachel. Peter. The doors. The album. They weren't things we were ready to talk about. But they were bound up in everything we had seen since our escape. We took in all of these factors, added them together, and landed at a single theory. Something that had sparked in Taylor Finn long ago. An idea that filled me with a nausea so intense that at times it would keel me over. Something that made no sense, but also the only sense. That somebody, somehow, had sheltered artists from the apocalypse.

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‘I think he was an architect and she was a florist. Maybe with her own little store nearby,’ said Lizzy.

‘They sound like characters from *Lost*,’ replied Taylor.

I laughed and the Finns looked at me. We were seated on the balcony, waiting for the sun to go down and the lights to start.

‘God. Imagine if this whole thing was some bullshit *Lost* type deal,’ I said.

‘What happened in *Lost*?’ asked Lizzy.

‘Weren’t they all dead the whole time or something?’ I replied.

‘I’ll be so mad if I find out I was dead this whole time,’ said Lizzy.

Taylor smiled at her twin and looked back out at the sunset. They were pretty killer from up in the hills. The horizon full of gleaming Indian Ocean. The city hazy and golden in the foreground.

Chess shuffled about next to Lizzy, standing up and trotting in a half circle before sitting again. He had been doing that a lot lately. Hearing things that we couldn’t.

Lizzy gave him a ruffle and he settled. Taylor pulled

open a can of baked beans and sniffed them carefully. The house had an amazing wine cellar, but not much in the way of unperishables.

‘How come there aren’t any foods that get better with age?’ I asked.

‘Cheese, sausage, kimchi,’ said Lizzy.

‘I wouldn’t be hitting up any of the cheese that I’ve seen lately,’ I replied.

‘Do you think we could poison the Bulls with bad food?’ asked Taylor.

‘Holy shit, Taylor,’ said Lizzy.

‘We can’t hide away from them forever,’ she replied.

She and Lizzy shared a glance. I looked northward to the airport. The land was dim and blurry in the fading light, but I could still make out a flat stretch of grey signalling the runways.

‘We could stick to the hills, go around and enter from the other side,’ I suggested.

‘Where there are no Bulls?’ said Lizzy.

I shrugged. We still didn’t totally get the animal thing. They were out there, but seemingly just in random clusters. A scattering of dogs. The odd house cat. A flock of shrieking waterbirds. We could only assume that the animals of Perth hadn’t disappeared alongside the humans. What we were seeing now, almost two years on, wasn’t a pet store madhouse but a thinning array of struggling urban survivors. Unsurprisingly, there were far more pit bulls than pomeranians.

‘Maybe there aren’t. It looks less suburban out there,’ said Taylor.

Lizzy was silent. I wondered how much Chess factored into these type of discussions now. Taylor looked at me for an answer.

‘It might be. Sorry, I haven’t really been out that way much,’ I said.

Taylor nodded and turned back to the horizon. This was how most of our serious discussions had gone lately. Never really getting off the ground. Everyone seemingly happy to let the conversation slide toward something less pressing.

The sun dropped into the ocean and a thin spike of red shot up abruptly out of the city. It swept dramatically north–south, then east–west.

We watched as the colour changed to blue and pulsed in a slow, rhythmic pattern. I traced the beams back to the ground and tried to work out where in the city they might be coming from. My memory of the city grid was vague, but the source was in there somewhere.

‘Wow,’ said Taylor, drifting out to the railing.

I still wasn’t sure if I understood this kind of industrial art like Taylor and Lizzy and others seemed to. The way it took forever to orchestrate, then sometimes only existed for a moment. The way you couldn’t compare it to another book or film or painting. How it didn’t help you escape the world, but thrust you into it.

But since we had been up in the hills I had started to

crave the lightshows. Nights without them felt shallow and insignificant. Like nobody had spoken to us. Or *for* us.

There was a final strobe of green before it stopped and the city returned to grey. We hesitated for a moment, then shuffled back inside. Closing the door on a bush that buzzed and ticked with life all around us.

The following morning Taylor and I ran an inventory of our supplies. We had left Carousel with nothing but a demo album, a couple of walkie-talkies and my mishmash book of short stories, and had been getting by on whatever we could find since then. Because the population had disappeared with their pantries full and houses intact we had survived okay. But we weren't living in a shopping centre anymore. We had to plan ahead.

We were low on food and also needed things like clothes, batteries and sunscreen. Although large, the house didn't have a lot to offer. No camping gear or outdoors stuff. No backpacks, torches or batteries. Just a giant wine cellar and stacks of beautifully folded linen.

'I'm trying not to think of your stash in Army Depot,' said Taylor.

She sighed and closed another cupboard. I shook off a rush of guilt.

'We'll have to check out the neighbours. This place is like some minimalist nineties shrine,' she said.

‘Through the trees or back out to the highway?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know. What do you think?’ said Taylor.

‘I prefer the trees,’ I replied.

Taylor looked at me and nodded.

‘Let’s take a couple of these,’ said Taylor.

She slid two expensive looking golf clubs out of a kit by the door.

‘For the Bulls,’ she added.

I took one, switched on my radio and we headed off into the trees.

The house was perched on the lower half of the scarp with hundreds of other mansions pocketed across the hills above. We trudged upward through the thin, leafy forest, checking them off as we went. From a distance the Perth hills could look dense and green, even alpine. But within them the towering eucalypts held just a spindly canopy above a floor of grass trees, banksias and ancient rock.

After just two houses we already had more food than we could carry. The hills weren’t exactly rural, but the locals seemed to stock their pantries pretty liberally. Each place had the token rotted-out fridge and freezer. Generally the top shelves of the pantries were useless also. But on the lower levels, or at the back, we found cans, nuts and dried food. Never exciting, but edible and reassuring none the less.

I hated snooping through people’s kitchens. They were always so full of past life and emotion. Photos and kids’

drawings on the fridges. Lunchboxes half packed on the benches. Notes about dentist appointments and holiday accommodation scrawled down beside phones. I was training myself to look past this stuff. To stay objective and focused. Or numb, as Lizzy would say. But it was never easy. People's homes were nothing like the soulless shops to which we had become accustomed.

We left small stockpiles of supplies on driveways to collect on our way back and kept moving upward. Taylor chirped away to Lizzy on the radio, making sure we stayed in range. We had planned for all of us to go, but Lizzy was worried about how Chess might react to being out in the open like this. He didn't spook too easily, but we had no idea where he had come from or what he had been through. There was no evidence that the mansion was his home previously, so we assumed Chess had travelled from somewhere else before finding us. I think Lizzy was worried he might decide to take off back there.

By midmorning the heat had risen up out of the suburbs where it would cloak the bush until dusk. We would welcome this by the poolside, but not out here. The forest floor seemed to stay cool by bouncing the sunlight back upwards. Taylor and I had the uncomfortable sensation of being shaded from the sky, but slowly burned from the floor. Thankfully most of the properties stored water in huge tanks beside the houses in case of bushfires. We unclipped hoses and pumps to take cool blasts of rainwater in the face

and neck. Hydrated and more than halfway up the ridge, we kept moving, still taking the odd food item, but quietly more interested in seeing what lay east of the hills.

The final house on the ridge was a modest brick and tile place that looked older than the others. We stopped in the driveway and looked down at the bush speckled with roofs below. In another section of the hills one of them could easily be my parents' place. I felt a rumble of emotion and set off again, ignoring the final house and leaving Taylor to follow for once.

The ground rose sharply for fifty metres before levelling off. I moved out into full sunlight, the bush thinning in anticipation of the scrubland and desert to the east. Like explorers arriving a hundred years too late we took our final steps to the edge of the ridge and gazed out eastward.

'Wow,' whispered Taylor.

For a moment I thought she was being sarcastic. Then I realised she and Lizzy probably hadn't seen farmland like this before. A barren patchwork of paddocks broken only by the snake of bitumen or branches of a eucalypt. The farmland was serviced by a highway sweeping down from somewhere to the right of us. There was a petrol station and a cluster of stores a few kilometres along this road, and at least one homestead that we could make out. Otherwise it was the lifeless summer palette of rural Australia.

'That's it then,' said Taylor.

I looked at her. 'What do you mean?'

‘It happened everywhere,’ she replied.

‘I’m pretty sure that the view from here would look like this a lot of the time. Irrespective of any global catastrophe,’ I said.

Taylor wasn’t convinced.

‘See that truck down there?’ she asked.

I turned back and traced the highway as it headed east into the distance. At the point where my eyes started to struggle, I saw something. A roadtrain. It was strewn about the road. The back half lying sideways. The front half off to the left. Shrubs had begun to grow up around the cab. The driver had disappeared with the rest of them.

Taylor turned and headed back to the house, writing off the rest of the country with a shrug, like only she could. I lingered for a while, trying to figure out how I felt about the world now that I could finally look at it. It seemed weird that our only view from Carousel for all of those months was of the hills. And now we were out of there, this is where we found ourselves.

When I arrived back down at the last house, Taylor was in the driveway, empty-handed.

‘Should we check inside?’ I asked.

‘I did. It’s empty,’ she replied.

Her brain was ticking over.

‘What, totally?’ I asked.

‘Yep. All the cans, packets, batteries. As if we had already been there,’ she replied.

I looked at the house with new caution.

‘That’s weird, right?’ said Taylor.

‘Yeah,’ I replied. ‘The final house.’

‘Do you think somebody stopped here to load up before heading east?’ asked Taylor.

‘Maybe. Probably,’ I replied.

‘How far is the nearest city?’ she asked.

‘City? A long way,’ I replied. ‘There are small towns though. Maybe every fifty kilometres or so. Until the desert.’

‘Do you think we should head that way, too?’ she asked, carefully.

‘I don’t know,’ I replied. ‘It seems pretty definite.’

Taylor nodded, but was quiet.

‘Plus the airport is west,’ I said.

Taylor looked at me and smiled. She dropped her head onto my shoulder and kept it there for a moment. Taylor had been carrying around a stack of disappointment at what we had found since leaving Carousel. It could be blurred by the mansion and the pool and the sunshine, but days like this brought it hurtling back, front and centre.

She straightened. ‘Let’s get all this stuff back to the house before it gets any hotter. I need a swim and some breakfast.’

We set off back down to the house.