

**DAVE
WARNER
WHEN IT
RAINS**



FREMANTLE PRESS

Her first conscious thought is diffuse, shaded by a sarong, like she used to do to the lamp back in the Surry Hills flat when she was expecting a 'gentleman caller' as Bronny her actor-flatmate would joke. She hasn't thought of Bronwyn in years. Wonders what she is doing now. Aspirations of playing Sydney Theatre Company, scored a couple of ads. Lives diverge. Best friends are gone from the radar. Nobody can be bothered with the upkeep. Weeds in a rental's garden ...

She drifts in dark grey mist for a while, then the bulb in her head brightens. Where is she? A vehicle of some kind. With who?

She tries to sit up but can't. Her legs are bound together, and her hands. Panic floods her.

'Let me go!' she screams as the vehicle bumps over rough ground. When there is no answer, she bellows, 'Helllp!', drawing out the sound as long as her breath can hold. Fear is sprouting by the millisecond, wrapping her up, strangling her. She has had too much to drink anyway. Plus, those joints. Tonight, just one more in life's spilled ashtray.

Dancing at the pub: she remembers that. Then – what? It's blank as the sheet of paper noting her lifetime achievements. She screams at least three more times. Then stops. It is pointless.

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Light from a half moon spills into the back of the vehicle but otherwise it's pitch out there. This is as far from artificial light as you can be. No roads, no petrol stations. No people. She envisages the car's headlights probing a black, endless belly. No chance of confirmation

possible from here on the gritty surface she's lying on. Has to be a four-wheel drive, for out here where there are only tracks, even gravel is a rare luxury. She understands now, in some ethereal way, that this night has long been promised her.

She should never have listened to him. Wasn't doom squatting in her heart the moment she heard his message?

Despite her bound feet and her hands tied behind her back she manages to roll on her side. She fights to get her torso off the deck, stretches her neck up at a weird angle.

'Please, I'll do anything you want.'

Her words are soaked in desperation, but she can't bring herself to believe they will change anything. The bullet had been fired long ago. All this time it has been travelling unerringly to the target she'd painted on her own chest.

The driver pays no heed to her, does not tell her to shut up, does not slow down, or even reach around to clip her. For all she knows he has earphones in, listening to music.

Perhaps it is the drugs, but she feels an inability to offer any further physical resistance. Hers is a resignation, near total. For eight years her life has been a shadowland. It seems that will soon come to an end: the creeping anxiety, the paranoia, leaves whispering in accusation, the derisive hiss of combers on even the most deserted of beaches.

Another wave of anguish surges through her.

'Anything!' she screams, going through the motions, but deep inside knowing the torpedo tube door is already welded shut. The lassitude settles over her again. Bronwyn got a part in a mini-series, didn't she? She'd forgotten that. Remembers now a wrap party somewhere near Taylor Square, genuine coke off toilet lids. They'd gone their separate ways when the lease ran out. Nine years. Bronny might be a mother by now.

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That first trip to the west had been a high point ... no pun intended ... opportunities stretched in front of her like ... like endless lines of coke. Shitty analogy. There is no invention in her now. Hasn't been

for years. Her mouth opens to cry out but this time all she manages are sobs.

An image of a long-ago Christmas Eve comes to her: satin pyjamas and coloured lights around her family garage, snacks laid out for visitors; white Christmas, nuts, pretzels. She'd helped her mum. It made her feel grown up. She'd waited in bed long after the guests had gone, and her little brother had stopped chattering and plunged into dreamland. She'd waited full of determination and expectation, alert for the sound of reindeer hooves. And then she'd drifted towards oblivion, just like now.

Finally, she had capitulated, her vigil unsuccessful.

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The car slows and stops. Her muscles tighten. Terror has formed a mould around her, a full-body death mask.

A back panel opens, air blows in and she smells the bush and ... moisture. A river or a creek. She feels a presence looming over her.

'Please,' she starts before something pricks her neck. A thought struggles out: maybe this is for the best ...

The veil descends over her ...

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Her next conscious thought is she has wet herself. It is dismissed almost the same instant. She is in water, waist deep. Her hands remain bound, only now they are looped around a rough wooden post at her back. She yells into the cavernous night, her eyes adjusting to the moonlight, picking out wooden stumps encircling her like cricket fielders, perhaps the remnants of a jetty. But her legs, what's with them? She tries to lift her feet. They are heavy as lead. Suddenly she understands what has happened to her, the situation in which she finds herself, the awful symmetry of what has been prepared for her.

This time when she screams, it is with a power that can only be generated by the most intense, primal dread.

They are out there, those prehistoric creatures. Her galloping heart taps out its telegram: 'Not this death, anything but this'. Before she

can wail again, she hears that slight suction sound when the massive reptile pulls itself from a muddy bank. She does not hear it enter the water but even as she screams anew, she can feel the resultant ripples running up under her ribs.

Her cry is still thrusting from her throat towards the moon, her tongue still trilling when the monster strikes, severing her body in two.

Of all the Friday-night drinking holes Josh Shepherd would have chosen to spend his Friday night in, the Picador ran last. He'd lost count of the number of times he'd been called out here as a young uniform. The pool cues had higher IQs than the blokes wielding them, and a large portion of whatever brains they had wound up spilled on the sticky carpet, or on the bitumen in the carpark because of a dumb argument over house rules on the eight ball.

Now he was a detective sergeant, Shepherd didn't have to bother with that crap, but what do you do when you are nominated best man, and Robbo, the upcoming groom, wants to get a few of his mates together for a drink, and suggests the Picador because Robbo feels quite at home here? Okay, normally you tell your mate, 'Sorry, no can do,' and suggest some other venue. Or you make up an excuse, like your toe has gone gangrenous from where that turtle snapped it. Trouble was, Robbo was also captain of the footy team, and Josh was astute when it came to sucking up.

At the start of the last season Josh had initially been pissed off he'd been moved from the glamorous centre half-forward position to anchor the defence at centre halfback. He'd been mollified, however, when Dutchy, one of the committee, had leaked the news to him privately during a urinal visit at a Sunday recovery session, that he was leading the club best-and-fairest. This he had duly won. So, in the interests partly of team unity, but more importantly of maintaining his status come the next season, and possibly winning back-to-back b&f medals, Josh hadn't said boo when Robbo nominated the Picador as venue for a pre-bucks'-night piss-up.

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It was around nine-thirty now and Shepherd was ready to head home. Saturdays he liked to rise early and polish off a ten-k run before a long and relaxed breakfast topped off with a swim. Most of the clientele of the Picador had been drinking since Friday early knock-off and things were getting untidy. A lot of FIFOs had absconded from their Pilbara and Kimberley dongas and headed to Broome for shore leave. That always made for a tinderbox. Even though the numbers of women working the mines had increased a lot over the last couple of years, most had the good sense to steer clear of here. He supposed those rare women who did venture here enjoyed having their drinks bought for them. Predictably, however, their scarcity encouraged claim-jumping. That, or arguments over the pool table were the matches that invariably set the tinderbox ablaze.

‘Fellas, I’m off,’ said Shepherd, rising from his bar stool. He parried the demands of ‘one for the road’ from his three remaining teammates, visited the gents and, having relieved himself, headed into the sultry October air to his car. A couple of bays from it, two blokes and a young woman, listing like boats in a marina, were in what passed for conversation.

‘Come on. We can drop you back after.’

‘I dunno. I mean youse nice and all but ...’

The bigger of the two blokes with a mass of curly hair was doing the talking. ‘You’ll have the night of your life. I’m telling you the gear we got will blow your fucking—’

Shepherd’s head had turned at that and the big bloke had spotted him.

‘What are you staring at, dipshit?’ The big bloke.

See, this was why Shepherd hated the fucking Picador.

‘If you’re talking about illegal drugs, which is what it sounds like, then you best leave it.’

The big bloke advanced. Shepherd was taller but this bloke had the back and shoulders of a gorilla.

‘What’s it the fuck to you?’

‘Detective Sergeant Shepherd, Broome police. I know your number-plate. Enjoy the rest of your night. Legally.’

Shepherd turned back to his car and was about to zap it when he felt a tremendous blow to the back of his head. His knees buckled, then a fist powered into his kidney, and he sagged. He was hit in the side of the head and his knees dropped onto the bitumen. A boot struck him from the right, then he was hit somewhere near the eye. He was kneeling now, and the blows were still coming. He toppled, tried to shield his head. Kicks pummelled both sides of his body, at least two bastards going him. His ears rang. His head was light, empty, most of his consciousness had fled already but the waves of pain in the rest of his body were undiminished. Where was he? There was no land beneath his feet, no horizon, no beacon. An ocean swirled around him. He fought to stay afloat but wasn’t strong enough. The depths claimed him.

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These Friday nights at the Derby house had become a routine. A much better one, thought Clement, than the norm of the previous eight years: drinks at the Anglers, usually with Bill Seratono, a chicken curry takeaway finished off solo with a half-bottle of wine in his small pad above the chandler on the wharf, evocative Brian Wilson songs turning him to mush. Nostalgia, futility, an invasive sense of failure, dehydration, fitful sleep.

He looked across, admiring the curve of her naked right buttock, her long legs scissoring the sheet, one above, one below, so that only the right one with the tattoo of the archer on her calf was visible. Copied from an artist named Kirchner, she’d told him. The one on her left leg was of two blue horses. Apparently, it too was a copy of a famous painting by another German artist, but he couldn’t remember the artist’s name.

‘Why did you pick those particular paintings?’ Clement had asked.

Lena, in nothing but a leopard-skin thong at that moment, had stretched back, looked at him through those smoky green-grey eyes of hers and said, ‘The tattooist graduated from the Berlin School

of Fine Art and Design. His name was Manfred. He specialised in German expressionism. This kind of art. He is the best tattooist in Berlin, probably Germany, maybe the world, and ...'

'Why is he doing tattoos?'

'Why do you think? He makes a shitload of money. But you interrupt me.' Lena could be very blunt, very German. It was a lesson he'd learned early on in their near three-month relationship.

'I apologise.'

'The other reason I pick them is the colour. Blue is the best tattoo colour, right? The horses are blue in the painting, so I figured why alter that? And the archer is blue, mainly. The archer aims for something. Maybe they hit it, maybe they don't, but they are aiming, not searching. I like that.'

Yes, thought Clement, Lena was decisive. She doesn't drift like me, the untethered rowboat. She'd ridden into town on her motorcycle like a movie cowboy. Her long finger tapped the tattoo on her left leg.

'The horses are free. But still, they are together. Because they wish to be.'

The tattoos were quite large, and yes, very high quality compared to what Clement was used to, but he was pleased she had only the two. He asked her if she was going to get more.

'I don't think so. I don't want to be defined by my tattoos. I don't feel that need. Like people who need six sunglasses, or ten hats. That's limiting.'

She revealed she had thought of getting a 'tubist' image on her arse. 'A Franz Leger or Max Ernst. Like *Celebes*, you know?'

He didn't. She found a photo on her phone. It looked like a large vacuum cleaner. He was glad she had decided against it. It was silent outside. She loved it here, the place in Derby that he'd originally bought as a weekend where he might play dad to Phoebe. How quickly the time had gone, how much of life he had squandered.

He continued to study her, dark hair fanning over the pillows. Most nights they were together he found himself contemplating if this was the inevitable midlife crisis playing out as the cliff that was his fiftieth birthday loomed. Lena was, he believed thirty-six. He was worried

about asking her for specifics in case it turned out she was younger still. He didn't believe her youth had anything much to do with his hooking up with her. If anything, that had acted as a deterrent.

I shouldn't be worried about people judging me, he thought, but I am. Especially, he'd been concerned what Phoebe might think if he began a relationship with a much younger woman. Phoebe was eighteen now, probably she didn't care but he didn't want to embarrass his daughter.

He had thought everything was under control with Susanna, his previous ... what did you call them? 'Lady friend' sounded ridiculous and girlfriend sounded wrong. Whatever the word was, it had appeared he and Sue were going to work out. In a place like Broome the fact was most of the prospective love interests you met were young. It was a transient population: tourists, young people on gap years, young professionals on internships. When he'd finally motivated himself to look at meeting somebody single, he had discovered that there wasn't a big pool of available females close to his own age. Sue – she preferred Susanna – had in fact been older than him by two years, and that hadn't bothered him in the least. It had initially been refreshing to have the same cultural touchstones. Like movies: shared Maltesers, shared experiences of youthful love, holding hands watching the latest blockbuster. When he'd been courting Marilyn, *Runaway Bride* and *Notting Hill* made lasting impressions on him. According to Sue it had been the same with her ex, although they had already been married by then.

Of course, Sue had never heard of Doctor John – that might have been expecting too much – but she loved Michael Jackson and 'Horses' and U2. Clement had let that slide but for the life of him he couldn't match up those three. Did it just mean Sue's music taste was whatever other people seemed to like? He'd behaved himself, tempted as he was to bemoan 'Sunday Bloody Sunday' as the most overrated song of the modern era. Sure, he thought it was an okay song, perhaps even a good song. He'd said nothing, and to be honest that had seemed the wise choice as the relationship had bloomed. Sue had replaced his threadbare towels with fluffy ones and decorated his

bed with cushions. He had almost forgotten that part of living with a woman. It was comfortable, it was pleasant not being on your own, the house no longer smelling of sweat and worn runners. But. The strength of being the same age was also the problem. Sue's twenty-four-year-old son carried on like he was sixteen. Jordan lived in Sydney and bled her for money. 'Bludged,' Clement's old man would have said. He couldn't keep a job or girlfriend, did drugs, lied. This upset Sue greatly. Foolishly, Clement had stuck his nose in where it wasn't wanted, said the boy needed tough love. Once, when Jordan rang, Clement picked up Sue's phone and told him this to his face. And that was the end of Sue and him. It had crumbled quickly.

When you're our age, ruminated Clement, there is too much history: spouses, kids, habits. At least though he had Sue to thank for making sure he now had decent manchester. She had headed back to Sydney, but the fluffy towels remained.

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It was surprising how quickly after the demise of the relationship he had fallen back into the old ways. In fact, if his memory was correct, it was on a Friday night after the Anglers, in the midst of a curry and a large glass of one-too-many wines, that he had received an overseas call from Mathias Klendtwort, a former German policeman he'd come to call a friend even though they'd never met in person. Mathias' former colleague had been brutally murdered eight years back, and Clement had called him for background on the victim. The two had hit it off and every six months or so one would call the other, Klendtwort because he was a little bored, Clement because he was lonely. Clement found it so much easier to confide in somebody thousands of kilometres away than to an office colleague, even a good friend like Graeme Earle. They had shot the breeze for a while, then Mathias had come to the point.

'Listen, the reason I am calling is my niece, Lena, is coming to Australia, and when she said she was going to visit Broome, I mentioned you.'

Clement was already running through his brain where he might

First published 2024 by
FREMANTLE PRESS

Fremantle Press Inc. trading as Fremantle Press
PO Box 158, North Fremantle, Western Australia 6159
fremantlepress.com.au

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Cover images by Brad Wooler, bradwooler.com; Shutterstock, shutterstock.com/image-illustration/smoky-abstract-background-218842384

Cover design Nada Backovic, nadabackovic.com

Printed by Everbest Printing Investment Limited, China



A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN 9781760993177 (paperback)

ISBN 9781760993184 (ebook)



Department of
**Local Government, Sport
and Cultural Industries**

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Fremantle Press is supported by the State Government through the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries.

Fremantle Press respectfully acknowledges the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation as the traditional owners and custodians of the land where we work in Walyalup.



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Paper from well-
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FSC® C124385