

NOCK LOOSE

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PREFACE: The 1982 Commonwealth Games

...she's one of the shining stars of the Australian team, Ken...
...that's right, Barry, an absolute powerhouse...
...now looky here, how she fires them off without a second thought...
...not a moment of hesitation, Baz, not a moment...
...this next one's for the gold...hold on...she's...
...lowering her bow...the clock is counting...what's she...
...looking at something...something's turned her head...
...in the stands...caught her attention...the clock is ticking...
...five, four, three, two—

PART 1: NOCK



1. 'Flame Trees' [Karaoke Version]

They blast Cold Chisel and kick off hell. The song choice is a bit on the nose but they're not subtle people. Aren't meant to be. Five men dressed as knights, drunk on cider and violence, tear through the darkness in a beat-up ute. Two sit up front cranking the music as they slide further and further into hysterics. The other three stand on the ute bed: one holds a flaming torch steady so that the other two can light the kerosene-soaked cloth tied to their arrow shafts. They nock, draw, loose:

Nock.

Draw.

Loose.

Nock.

Draw.

Loose.

Nock.

Draw.

Loose...

...an inferno.

They can feel the heat through their chainmail as they speed off into the night.

Half the countryside goes up. Three families lose their homes. The apple orchards are torched. Firefighters battle the blaze for the better part of a week. The news says it's the worst fire to hit Bodkins Point

since The Summer of Ash in '69. The flames got as far as the new skate park, warping the half-pipe and making it unusable—a relief to some.

People whisper arson. It's arson. Arsonists again. Arson alright. The police find a Gatorade bong perched on a burnt-out tree stump. A local boy is arrested. Speeches are given. Awareness campaigns announced. Charity drives pop up. The town descends into gossip and conspiracy, and just as quickly, indifference.

People who can, move on with their lives.

People who can't, sit and wonder about the people who can until they go mad.

Agincourt will go ahead, anyway.

2. Harder to Believe

When they told her that her granddaughter was amongst the missing, she sat there quietly and said, “Ok.” When they told her she was dead, she filled the hall with a sound borrowed from the animals at the abattoir: agony, outrage, shock. She took the shape of a wombat hit by a car—roadkill—curled in on herself on the plastic school chair they’d sat her on, as if hunching up in a ball would somehow bend and break the horrible act that had just snuffed out her granddaughter’s life—*her* life! Beyond the snot and tears and the now sickening stink of smoke she felt a large, callused hand rubbing her back, and a deep familiar voice saying:

“Jesus, Joy, I’m so sorry.”

Hannah was dead. Burnt-up. Gone.

Nothing was left. Joy’s family home was little more than soot and cinders. With the exception of her time in Japan, this had been her home since she was a baby. But there was nothing left of it now, just the old stump in the middle of what had been her family’s last remaining apple grove, a little ring of trees that stood witness to the best and worst of her and her kin.

The Morgans insisted she move in with them. They’d help prepare the funeral. They were like a second family to her and Hannah, though they’d only moved to Bodkins a little under a year ago. They’d bought the old McCarthy farmstead that had sat empty since the last

McCarthy broke his neck falling from his tractor in 2019 (drunk on cider), and they'd brought a little life back to this corner of the valley, which had little outside of apple orchards and bandicoots.

Casca Morgan was an academic, currently researching Aboriginal massacre sites in Western Australia's South West, tracing lineages of mass death and slaughter, and marking down the country bakeries named after the people who enacted it. She spent her days poring over maps, digging through local records, and sticking her beak in people's private libraries, photo books, and reminiscences, with an exactitude that made her terrifying to both the ignorant and the impatient alike.

Her husband, Jeb Morgan, a Noongar man originally from Walyalup but raised in Narrogin, was a world-renowned painter and sculptor, working in metals, plastics, glass, and anything he could get his hands on to make pieces one critic described as "necessitating a dexy script." He had just closed up an exhibition in Sydney: a series of dioramic vignettes inspired by his wife's research and his favourite thing on the planet, anime (in this case, the series *Record of the Lodoss War*). He billed himself as "The Original Aboriginal Weeb" or, when feeling cheeky, which he often was, a "Weeboriginie".

Joy was sleeping on the fold-out couch in Jeb's study (what his daughter Ophelia dubbed his "Weeb Cave"), a windowless room lined with shelves bearing countless volumes of manga and anime box sets, with display cases for his statuettes, model kits, costumes, props, weapon replicas, and waifu pillows. Soon after meeting the Morgans, Joy had learned Jeb was a huge fan of *Sukeban Yumi*, so she gifted him the costume she'd worn as Kusatta Ringo Ame on the TV show—a candy-apple shaped and coloured *tokusatsu* armour set—and the iconic bow of Yumi herself: bubble-gum pink, with glossy red flame decals. He'd had Joy perform some trickshots with it in the backyard, laughing like a giddy child as she shot apples from a distant tree while Casca rolled her eyes and smiled, having long accepted her husband's permanent adolescence.

The pair made for a funny couple. Casca was slight, swanlike, and springy as an adolescent roo, where Jeb was boxy, pot-bellied, and brambly, like a mischievous little bunyip from a children's storybook.

Their daughter, Ophelia Morgan, was somewhere between the two: slinking where her mother might strut, glancing where her father might galumph. She was quick to smile and quicker to laugh, flitting around a room like a kookaburra that had flown in through an open window, shaking up otherwise tedious dinner parties, functions, and exhibition openings. She was seventeen, the same age Hannah was, or had been, the two having become best friends roughly five minutes into their first meeting: Ophelia had turned up on their doorstep one day with a PlayStation, games, and manga stuffed into a refrigerator bag, and asked Hannah if she wanted to watch *Serial Experiments Lain* together. That was that. They were thick as thieves.

But now Hannah was dead, and Ophelia sat across the little kitchen table from Joy, no hint of the sparkling laughter that usually followed her everywhere like a loyal dog. They stared back at each other, two voids, grasping at their opposite's emptiness in the hope it could swallow them up and obliterate their pain. The table had a map of the town on it, scribbled over with Casca's notes and many circles and exes that may be—or point to—a mass grave. Casca came over and placed two mugs of piping-hot peppermint tea in front of them, which they both gulped down in unison.

“Ok,” Casca's singsong voice was down-tempo, “are we ready?”

It was a small turnout. Bodkins Point was a close community, but shied away from what its people saw as life's unnatural naturals: sex and death, that is when they occurred outside of Agincourt, anyway. Hannah had committed the cardinal sin of indulging in both. Plus, she wasn't well liked. She wasn't liked at all, really. She had stuck out like a sore thumb at Bodkin Kindie, Bodkin Primary, and finally Bodkin

High (all the same building), a peculiar child who liked to write sexually explicit fan fiction and poetry about people's ankles. She loved nothing more than to speak out of turn and wind up the "stuffies and the stupids", which was always risky in a town that was, admittedly, built for—and by—both. She was not unlike her mother, Artemis, in that way, who had also butted up against Bodkins' humdrum day-to-day rituals and routines until it became too much and she threw herself from Viviane Bridge, leaving Joy with nothing but grief, guilt, and a three-year-old granddaughter to raise. Hannah would say that she could not remember what her mother looked or sounded like, but she *could* remember her smell: beeswax lip balm and vaseline, apple juice, and a hint of creek bed.

Joy sat in the front pew with Ophelia holding her hand, Jeb and Casca in the row behind rubbing her back occasionally for support. People trickled in and gave their condolences: a few of Hannah's classmates (that nice Ginny girl), a couple of coworkers from Mrs Roseworth's bakery, Mrs Roseworth herself (who left Joy a Tupperware container of her famous lamingtons) and, of course Ronald Fletcher, who the town knew as "Big Ron", and was Joy's oldest friend.

Ron had had a crush on Joy for over sixty years. The two had known each other since they were babies (both their fathers worked for Bodkin Timber Mill and Bodkin Cidery). Like most lifelong Bodkinites, they knew about as much as there was to know about the other, short of tapping their phone and setting up cameras in their toilets. Ron was a confirmed bachelor, having given his heart to Joy as a boy, and having given up on love when Joy returned from Japan married to Glenn. He was the town's Mr Fix-It during the quiet months, but he was best known to the Bodkinites, and Agincourt, as their most accomplished blacksmith—a preternatural talent, who'd be considered a genius if he lived anywhere but Bodkins Point, which considered genius somewhat rude. When he wasn't mending the town's postboxes and

picket fences, or forging great swords and hammering out mail in his workshop, Ron was knocking back pints at The Hen Feather with his housemate and little brother Nelson (himself pushing sixty), who'd depended on Ron for just about everything ever since an acquired head injury had scuttled his childhood while sealing him within it, forever.

"Nelson sends his love, Joy," Ron's voice was sonorous but husky, "he's no good at these things. He'd be caterwauling like mad."

He stood with his hands clasped awkwardly in front of him, his cheeks blushing as they always had when he spoke to her, stammering a bit as he held back tears:

"Sure, sure," he wiped his eyes with a huge hanky, "she was such a sweet girl, a lovely kid..."

"Thanks Ron." She reached out and patted his hand, but she couldn't look him in the face. They had supported each other through so much hurt and loss over the years, but she did not want him to see her as she was now—empty, spent, unselfed.

"Let me know if I can do anythin' for ya," he sniffed, "Nelson 'n me'll have ya over for tea, when yer ready."

"Thanks Ron. I will. I would. Have tea with you boys. When I'm ready."

"When yer ready."

He squeezed her shoulder a with a hand as big and warm as an oven mitt, then moved to a pew at the back of the almost empty church, leaving her to sob as sixty-three years of life in Bodkins Point ran down her spine like hot coals.

Big Ron and Small Joy, that's what they'd called them in school, and that's what had stuck. Despite everything, the Bodkinites were pretty straightforward people, especially when it came to bullying: they'd dubbed him Big Ron—well, Big Dumb Ron, at first—because he'd had the size, bearing, and beatitude of a huge dopey bull since he was a

small (though he was never *small*) boy. And they'd called her Small Joy because she was and remained very short, but also, she suspected, because she was a pretty glum child who brought little happiness to those around her. Kenneth Longinger, in around the third grade, had called her "Mrs Marble" because she was, in his words, "small and round, and you want to flick her away." She'd always been short and she'd always been fat, and she'd never minded—a tough little marble with her ginger (now silvering) pageboy cut, her gappy teeth, rosy cheeks, snub nose, double chin, and pale yet ever reddening skin, flecked generously with freckles all over. Kenneth Longinger was long dead from cancer now, but he wasn't far off. She was a hard little prit, cracked beyond use after too many collisions.

"Ah, there you are, Joy!"

He walked over to her and bent briefly in a half-bow:

"I'm so sorry for your immeasurable loss, terribly nasty business!"

She hadn't expected to see him here today, but there he was, the Heir Apparently (another cruel nickname)—their king—looking down at her, his good crystal-blue eye fixed on hers, his mis-sized, miscoloured glass eye looking down Casca's dress. He was slim as ever, a rake really, not unlike a white-gum branch snapped off by a high wind. He leant on his silver-headed cane and pursed his thin lips while withdrawing his hand from Joy's, dusting his knuckles on his well-tailored alabaster suit, a suit he'd worn every day since his twenty-first, one which somehow managed to never get stained by the town's dust, mud, or beef pies, or more tellingly, his sweat (the Bodkinites couldn't comprehend him having a closet full of them, but he did). He pressed a little hard-bound leather book into her hands, bookmarked by the stem of a yellow rose freshly plucked from his English country garden.

"Th-thank you, Arthur. I didn't think—"

"—I didn't think I'd make it," he tutted, "I've spent the past week

holed up in The Castle with the Grand Council as we go over what's burnt beyond buggery versus what's singed but salvageable," his glass eye whirled wildly as he rolled it, "serious business, but deathly dull as always, I'm afraid. So I thought I'd pop on by for a spell during recess and pay my respects."

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

"And don't you worry," he plucked his glass eye out, breathed on it, and polished it on his lapel before popping it back in his pallid head, "Agincourt is still happening, naturally."

"Naturally."

"We'd lose too much money if we called it off, *sigh*."

"Of course."

"And just imagine the moaning!"

"Imagine."

"Oh, which reminds me, Callum sends his condolences..."

"Oh?" Joy wasn't sure what to do with them.

"Yes, yes, the boy's in Dubai closing up his 'big deal'. Did you hear, Munter's coming home?"

"Munter's coming home..."

"Yes, he's pretty pleased with himself," Arthur sighed. "Honestly, I worry I spoiled the boy. One minute you're letting them sit on your lap and drive the Porsche around the paddock, the next they're sitting down and shaking hands with some prince who dines out on journo foie gras. It's all a bit exhausting, no?"

"Exhausting, yes."

He coughed and looked about the little church, his glass eye settling on the framed photo of Hannah perched atop the empty casket:

"She was a strange child, wasn't she?"

"By Bodkins' standards, yes."

"What other standards are there?"

Father Lester was clearly drunk, but the service was nice enough. Joy was unable to give her eulogy, unable to do anything but choke back sobs and moan like she'd been gutshot, so Jeb had taken her handwritten speech up and had a crack at translating her grief for those present:

“She was a lovely girl—” was as far as he made it before breaking down.

She was, though.

She had been.