

First published 2026 by  
FREMANTLE PRESS

Fremantle Press Inc. trading as Fremantle Press  
1/10 Parry Street, Fremantle, Western Australia, 6159  
fremantlepress.com.au

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Cover design by George Saad, georgesaad.com.au  
Cover images by Shutterstock, shutterstock.com; Vecteezy, vecteezy.com  
Printed and bound by C&C Offset Printing Co., Ltd.



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

ISBN 9781760996819 (paperback)  
ISBN 9781760996826 (ebook)



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

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.



THE  
BOOK  
OF THE  
AFTER

REBECCA  
HIGGIE



FREMANTLE PRESS

For my son

ቴዎድሮስ ያርጋ (ቴዲ)

Tewodros 'Teddy' Yirga

One day, dear heart, you and your generation  
will be the ones with power.

The Book of the After  
The Author

**T**his is not death, dear reader.  
Not even we, the dead, know the End.  
No, this:  
this is the *After*.



2049

# Guy

The twenty-first century had seen Guy's endeavours unduly curtailed. Flame was largely abandoned, replaced by the stable electric bulb. Paper, that wonderful fuel, had fallen out of favour. New generations embraced the laptop, the tablet, the digital pen. Wood, too, was a distant memory, replaced by electric heaters and ovens, by concrete and brick. Houses burned not so easily.

But, as ever, the dead innovated in the After.

Scented candles. They were popular. And books. Books, it seemed, were harder for people to let go. The scientist favoured both, his home a cathedral of hardbacks and flickering light. Guy had come to Australia specifically to find the man, having killed his colleague in London one month prior. Since his colleague's death, the scientist had doubled his efforts, his skin blanched from hours bathing in blue light. A laptop was open, and a desktop with two screens. Three whiteboards, covered in equations, stood in front of long-forgotten bookshelves. A television on the wall, muted, broadcast the news. So much technology. Yet the scientist insisted on paper, sketching in a notebook with the nib of a pencil. He was working on some machine to eat the plastic in the sea. For Guy, the details were irrelevant. He cared not for what they were doing, only that they might succeed.

Guy noted the candles in the room: two by the television, one by the laptop, one on the desk burdened by paper. *Banksia and white honey*. It reminded the scientist of his mother. A nurse, dead when he was nine. A plague, Guy believed. He forgot which one. He had no desire to ask her.

'Please,' the woman said. 'Don't let him be here when you do it.'

Guy sighed. He'd spent centuries arguing with the dead. The

scientist's mother wouldn't relent, her son's perpetual guardian.

'Your boy has the good sense to extinguish the candles when he leaves the house. What can a man do?'

'But he keeps everything locked. He won't get out.'

'Madam, fear not. Fires of this kind never spread quick in this age,' he said, gesturing at the fire alarm on the ceiling. 'He shall be alerted and, surely, he shall get out. He may even have enough time to extinguish the blaze.'

Guy didn't tell her he'd be most pleased if her son were to perish. Regrettably, she'd long since guessed. When he'd arrived, he'd been polite, doffing his hat and bowing deeply. Since then, he spoke only in response to her persistent questioning, and only when he wanted her to be quiet. She tried to identify his clothes, pick the era, figure out who he must've been to be remembered so long. If he gave her just his first name, she would know him. He was amazed a Catholic Englishwoman hadn't figured it out.

Her son, of course, was oblivious. Word rarely travelled between the Before and the After. He worked on his designs, glancing up at the television from time to time. Live footage of a press conference about to start. A hospital. A crowd. The camera tracked the arrival of a set of cars.

'Please,' the mother said. 'He's doing such good.'

'Yes, madam,' Guy said. 'That is why I am here.'

The television switched to static, sudden rolling pixels. The scientist's phone pinged, a message. Then another. *Ping ping ping*. That incessant sound of this age. The television came back to life, declaring **BREAKING NEWS**. The scientist unmuted it. Screams flooded the audio. As things unfolded, the mother, the son and Guy, they all knew: millions of eyes, of the living and the dead, were fixed on whatever screen was available to them.

The phone rang. Finally, the scientist answered.

'Matt? Yeah ... can you hear me?'

He moved to the other side of the room. 'You there?' He ventured into the hall. Faintly, his voice carried through to them. 'Can you hear me now? Too many black spots here.'

The mother turned to Guy. He leaned in, wanting a little to frighten her.

‘Remember, remember, the Fifth of November.’

She knew him now.

He then did what most of the dead could not. He touched the world of the living, nudging the candle on the desk. It tumbled and landed among a collection of notebooks. It flickered for a moment, sweet wax pooling, but then the flame caught.

The mother ran, screaming, to her son. Somewhere in the hall he was talking of ‘what happens now’. The flames spread through his notes and jumped to the decorative fabric draped over a bookshelf. It was delicate and went up in a flash of curling fire.

Everything was going as planned.

The fire alarm went off. The scientist ran back to the room. He tried to put out the flames as his mother cried, *Get out, Jason!* Guy ignored them, his attention now on the screen.

‘We can confirm ...’

The scientist abandoned his efforts and ran for the back door. His mother screeched. *The keys, Jason, get the keys!*

Guy stood in the flames until the television was consumed. The world burned with such noise. Through the roar, sirens of rescue sounded. Time to leave. He had no desire to see if the son had joined his mother.

Something else had happened now. Something bigger.

## Little Bee

Her car appeared on the television above his bed. He should've been out there, he *wanted* to be out there, but Queenie and the nurses said no. *She'll come to you, Little Bee, she'll come to you.*

'Love, look! It won't be long now,' Queenie said, pointing to the screen.

Together, they watched a smartly dressed woman walk towards the hospital's entrance. She shook hands with a doctor, her face animated and friendly. A journalist's commentary drowned out her voice.

Little Bee wriggled up, sitting a little higher. The permanent IV line in his chest, the one he didn't normally notice, itched. He straightened his play doctor's coat, tracing his fingers over the embroidered honeybee on the pocket. He wore it at every event, at every special appearance where cameras would be present. Marlee had given it to him when he was the face of Telethon.

On the screen, children came forward to greet the woman. The cameras click-clacked and, faintly, Little Bee heard her: 'Hello there, sweetheart.' The camera panned to a girl holding up a painting.

It was Bunny.

Everyone in the hospital had found out the woman was coming a week before. Comms insisted on calling her a 'VIP' but everyone knew it was her. Nurses gossiped about who had been chosen to speak with her, the rest told they weren't to say a word. Plans were drawn up to block off doors and lift wells, security stationed at every entrance and exit. The doctors prepped their favourite scrubs, the ones with bears and balloons and spaceships. Even the clown doctors got new red noses. And Bunny: Bunny painted a whale.

Without asking, Bunny had dragged a table, its legs squeaking, down the corridors and plonked it on the large fourth-floor balcony facing

Kings Park. She arranged plastic chairs around it as a barrier, the seats facing out. She then acquired an assortment of paint in varying shades of blue, green and grey, and stole someone's scrubs to use as an art smock. She found a large sheet of card from no-one-knew-where, and started painting. One of the nurses even put a pot of blue glitter on her table one night (it was Marlee, of course).

Little Bee knew many things about Bunny. She was eight, just like him. She was allowed to do stuff other kids weren't, just like him. And she was always at the hospital. Just like him.

'A whale?' he'd asked, peering over her chair barricade.

'Yes,' she stated. 'For the Prime Minister.'

'Why?'

'She needs a whale.'

'Why does she need a whale?'

Bunny dabbed glitter on her painting. 'A whale will take her to the end.'

Of all the things Little Bee knew, he was most certain of this: Bunny was odd. Odd, though, was the nature of the place, wards full of children who felt old and adults who acted young. Trying to cheer them up. Putting pots of glitter out for them. Bunny was a special kind of odd though. So, he guessed, was he.

On the television, the Prime Minister smiled at Bunny and her whale. Her eyes crinkled around the edges, just like Queenie's. Little Bee wondered what had etched those lines into the Prime Minister's skin, for the woman, like his mother, was not old yet. She looked like she would be nice, kind. She looked, to him, like a mother.

Then, the image scattered.

Pixels twitched. Static fuzz churned. The broadcast snapped to a screen declaring *STANDBY*. It was silent, almost. There was a faint beep, an electric whine like a heartrate monitor flatlining. *STANDBY*. And they did. Every second stretched as if time was being pulled.

A short siren pierced the air. Over the hospital intercom, a steady voice said, 'Code Black, hospital-wide. Patients and families, stay in your rooms. Outpatients and visitors, remain in the clinics. Staff, Code Black, *hospital-wide*.'

A flash of colour. Nurses, in their bright scrubs, running. Through

the glass door into the ward, Little Bee saw Marlee rushing patients back into their rooms.

Queenie jumped up. She pulled the privacy curtains across, obscuring their view. The door had no lock, so she dragged her chair and then the side table in front of it. She snatched cushions off the sofa bed and threw them into the bathroom.

The television came to life. The news anchor looked agitated, frightened. The siren sounded again—*Code Black*—and the intercom drowned out the television audio.

‘Off the bed, love,’ Queenie said.

She took him to the bathroom, locked the door and lay down with him on the mound of cushions. Her arms encased him, taking him back to his first memory in the hospital. She’d held him like this, her eyes brimming with tears, and she’d sung. In that memory there was movement, faceless nurses drawing blood, but the only thing with clarity was Queenie and her song. A silly tune that lilted like a nursery rhyme. It gave him a name.

‘Mum,’ he whispered.

‘Shh, love.’

The siren went off again. The intercom voice was calm, yet it declared a code coloured black with death.

‘Mummy, please, my song.’

She paused. Then, she whispered:

*You are my little bee*

*My ittle-wittle bee*

*You are my little bee*

*My little baby bee*

*You. Are. My. Little Bee.*

He leant into her. As her voice slowed, lengthening the *my lit-tle ba-by bee*, and then danced across each word on the final *you. are. my. little bee*, a part of him left the hospital. He floated above the Code Black, above the cancer that swam in his blood. His mind drifted, devoid of gravity. He imagined the two of them in a bubble, floating above the moon. Weightless. Without a care.

*You. Are. My. Little Bee.*

# Negus

**H**appy.  
Negus had not been happy for a long time.

But that morning when he entered Parliament House, the green carpet felt softer, the portrait-lined corridors were newly vibrant and warm. Even the black-and-white faces of yesteryear's Speakers seemed to smile more; everything shone. His security detail exchanged glances with one another as he strode towards his office, jauntily tapping his heels on the wood every time the carpet gave way to gleaming, polished floorboards. They were accustomed to his lethargy, to the anxiety he'd woven into his careful actions. Unbeknownst to them, his job had become increasingly untenable, dread steeped into every interaction with his Prime Minister.

Yet overnight, it'd all been lifted, and lifted in a way he didn't think possible. He didn't have all the answers, but he had a promise, and hope.

Hope.

Hope was another thing he hadn't felt for some time, and he couldn't stop smiling as optimism infused every thought, his mind inventing a thousand possibilities of what lay ahead. Perhaps, just perhaps, it would mean leaving this place. He valued his time in Parliament but was weary with what it had become. He wanted a settled life. And she had agreed.

He watched her, gazing across the footage that streamed into his office. He had three screens: one on the wall tuned to ABC News; a desktop streaming live from her socials; another, a screen of documents, things he should be reading. The stream, broadcasting from a staffer's phone, was seven seconds ahead of the television, truly

live. The television was muted, shutting out the commentary. He stared at the stream, trying to tune into her voice that competed with children buzzing around like bees and journalists shouting about bushfires. Only a few of her words were caught, delicate, drifting by.

Prime Minister Rigby.

Eleanor.

Why her parents thought to name her after a song about loneliness, he'd always wondered. He decided to finally ask her when she got back to Canberra. On the screen, the sunlight caught the grey in her otherwise long dark hair. Seams of silver, twirled into soft curls. The first time he'd spotted it, he'd embarrassed himself staring at her during a Cabinet meeting, surprised that this woman he'd known for so long seemed to be ageing. He ran his fingers across his scalp, feeling the white bristles that were invading the black. They were both getting older.

He glanced to his left. Jack, stationed at the door, had a propensity for looking in. The two men locked eyes. Jack swiftly turned away. Negus liked Jack, but disliked his presence. He was a plain-clothes officer from the Australian Federal Police Close Personal Protection unit. Every member of parliament was watched like this. Long before Negus' time, the 2029 terrorist attack that saw four MPs killed resulted in guards in every office and the construction of an expensive bunker in the bowels of Parliament House colloquially known as 'the basement'. The kidnapping of an MP in the same year saw personal arms placed in the residence of every parliamentarian. Negus detested it. As if he'd ever need to reach for a weapon when he was so closely watched. Public outings meant two to four, sometimes six, officers of Jack's variety.

Negus turned back to the screens. On the television, Eleanor was only just getting out of the car. On the stream, she shook hands with someone. In a few moments, the television caught up. But the stream moved on. Children approached her.

Lily knocked on the open door, a courtesy, and came in, brushing past Jack.

'Jonathan will be here in ten minutes.'

Negus had no idea why the Treasurer was coming to bother him. ‘Remind me again.’

Lily started to explain, but his attention drifted back to the stream. One girl, her face so serious, held up a painting of a whale.

A loud clap, sharp thunder. Red. Eleanor’s head opened. The image flipped, the phone clattering down, and the camera stared up at the sky, showing a vision of clear blue. Screams vibrated through the tinny speakers. A foot darted across the screen; the image swirled. It stopped again on the sky. White clouds drifted by as sounds of panic filled his office.

He couldn’t understand what he was seeing.

On the television, lagging behind the stream, the girl raised her whale painting. As if time had reversed. The screen flicked to static, and then standby. But the stream continued, all blue sky and screaming.

Jack came into the office, closed the door and said into his earpiece, ‘Ravi, report.’

Graphics declaring **BREAKING NEWS** burst onto the television. Lily unmuted it.

‘We come to you with breaking news! The Prime Minister has been shot! Her condition is un—’ The news anchor stopped. ‘We’re getting word from Sam Rippin at the scene. Sam ...’

Shouting filtered through crackling audio.

‘Rigby’s down! Shooter unknown!’

The television clashed with sounds from the stream. Lily reached over Negus and hit mute on his keyboard, then grabbed the remote and turned the television up.

‘An ambulance has arrived!’

‘Sam, what’s the Prime Minister’s condition?’

Background voices, commands of some kind, grew urgent and terrified. The journalist fell silent for what felt like too long. Then: ‘Good God.’

The man’s tone chilled Negus. Like sand drifting through water, he felt dread, cold and slow and heavy.

‘Sam, what is it?’

'She's ... the Prime Minister ... she's sustained significant head trauma.'  
*Head trauma.* Words to match the image. That single moment—of blood and skull shattering—elongated inside Negus' mind, going from a second, to two, to three, time slowing, details sharpening. He took one ragged breath, deep, and held it, his body frozen.

Somewhere, someone spoke.

*We can confirm.*

The news anchor was solemn.

*The Prime Minister is dead.*