

THE BREAK

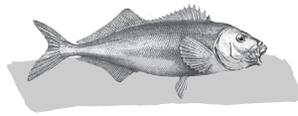
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A great tree stands in the southern corner of Western Australia, its bark carved with lines like rivers. Marri: the Nyoongar word for blood. Corymbia calophylla: given the common name marri because its sap is the colour of blood, oozing down woody bark into hard, jewelled sores.

The broken old marri arm hides a narrow hollow. Tucked inside in a plastic bag is a rolled-up map of the night sky, protected from the wind and rain and sun. The great tree swings restless next to a wide weatherboard house, next to a dark and moving river, next to the blue fusion of two oceans. If you stood beneath that tree you would see it all: the house, the river, the blue-gum plantations, the forest rambling around and between. At night, you'd see the Southern Cross hanging like a child's kite in the sky. And, if you closed your eyes, you'd see further still: the road leading to Greys Bay, where the bush ends and the limestone coast reaches out, and where the horizon opens so wide it reveals the very curve of the earth.



1

They'd sent Rosie Curran to make a story out of a young man's despair, though not in so many words. A story, about a guy leaping from the Leighton Beach tower — a *story*, for a newspaper, for people to sit down with over their morning cuppa, their bowl of muesli, their day ahead.

She'd looked straight at Frank, the news editor who farmed out each day's stories to the staff, but he wasn't going to turn flexible all of a sudden, not Frank.

'A suicide story, Frank?' she said.

'A public interest story,' he corrected. 'The psych unit turned the kid away last week.'

Rosie tried to imagine herself actually going there, waiting on her favourite beach, waiting under the tower with a speck of a man at the top. It could have been anyone — someone she knew, a friend — Christ! Anyone. And this wasn't the first rubbish story she'd had to do for *The Messenger*, for her stupid career, for the advertising people upstairs.

She was over it. Rosie, aged twenty-two, couldn't believe she'd stuck it out this long.

'For Christ's sake, Frank...'

She followed him into the kitchen, where the benchtop was a work of art, a collage of mug rings and shrivelled teabags. 'I don't want to go and watch a guy trying to do himself in.'

'Rosie,' he laughed, 'it's the nineties — nothing's sacred anymore.'

Isn't it? she thought. She took a breath. 'But this is a community newspaper! Surely there's another story I can cover, I mean, it's what we put in the paper that becomes news —'

‘Rosie, it’s a story, you’re a reporter. Go and do it, alright?’

She went out to the car, took a few breaths under the jacaranda tree and weighed up her options. She could either do the story, pretend to do the story, or outright refuse to do the story.

Panic crawled out of its nasty place. She felt her temperature climb. Who was she kidding? This wasn’t a school project, this was her fucking *job*. This was the rent, food in the fridge. Her future.

She looked west. The beach wasn’t far away. Leighton was where she and Cray spent most summer Saturday mornings, the corduroy sound of sand beneath their feet, the sun grilling them from above. There was something about those times at Leighton, something that Rosie risked forgetting in between. She’d stop there on hot evenings after work, when the sky went gentle, slipping into the end of another day, and when people were breathing again, breathing their own life.

2

Cray watched the clear water against his skin. Leighton never disappointed, always offered something different, depending on how he felt, depending on the swell, the wind, the sun. This beach didn't have the darker, moving water of beaches down south, where you always had to watch the current, check your position against the towels that were like compass points on the beach, make sure you hadn't moved out too far, or too close to the rocks. It was almost safer on a board, Cray often thought, at least you had something to float on, to cling to if need be.

On the sand, a beachcomber with a metal detector hovered close to Cray's gear, and Cray trod water a little harder, a little higher, keeping his eye on him. Harmless old coot, he thought, nothing better to do but scour the leftovers of other people's lives. He sank down into the cool, eclipsing the old man, and poked his toes about for sand, for an idea of his depth.

It was his week off. Cray had come down from the mine on Friday night – he always took the late plane, didn't want to spend any longer out there than he had to, the nights at the mess spent drinking, smoking, swearing. The guys out there could *drink*, the older guys who'd been there for years and who were never gunna leave – no reason to, no wife, no family, just hard work, huge pay packets and truckloads of beer for company. Thirty-year-old Cray couldn't keep up with them, and didn't want to. Three beers and he was wandering back to the donga for the night. He had one to himself, thank

god, he couldn't have hacked sharing a place with a snoring, farting, hungover grader operator. Besides, it wasn't a good thing to get too matey with the fellas; sacking non-performers was another heartening part of his job as a project engineer. As was rousing them after a night on the piss. Cray frequently had to drive from donga to donga at five-thirty in the morning, feeling fairly ordinary himself, to bang on doors, and had even had to shake a few blokes from their beds when the morning-after blur was too much. Rounding 'em up like cattle.

Aaah. It was another world out there. You had to laugh. You had to.

Rosie had said, before she'd fallen asleep, 'What do you dream about, Cray?'

Cray thought, *That depends if I'm here with you or there, in the desert.* He was lucky to get to sleep at all out there some nights, lay awake worrying about contractors and designs and deadlines. But he was here now, he was home. And so he dreamed about the things he could enjoy the next day.

'Beaches,' he'd told her. 'Swell.'

'Nice,' Rosie said sleepily.

The shock of the water on sticky skin. The shifting of sand and shells as peelers came through. Cray was so bloody glad he and Rosie lived by the coast, the ocean just a skin-lick away. He only wished he didn't have to leave it all the time. Settling and unsettling.

He'd asked Rosie to stop calling him when he was up at Leonora. It was better not to go through those phone calls, better just to look forward to his week off, to seeing her. And it was good, having a whole week off. He really relaxed then, going to the beach, swimming, fishing, heading to the fish pub with Rosie for a few beers and a seafood feast. But the four

weeks on site, they were long weeks. And the anticipation of them was worse than actually being there. And Shitslinger. Jesus.

Cray ducked under the surface and swam along the bottom to shore, seeing if he could make it without having to come up for air. He burst up in the warm shallows.

A thin smear of cloud shaded the water. Cray scanned the carparks, lined up side by side, beach by particular beach: Leighton – the bodysurfers’ beach; then the Dog Beach; followed by Cables – one of Perth’s excuses for a surf spot; Cottesloe – flesh, curves, oil and bikinis; and Swanbourne, where grown men wanked in the dunes.

Cray dried off in the carpark, next to the Woody, trying not to expose himself while he pulled off his boardies from under a towel wrapped around his hips. He headed home to read the paper and loll about in the hammock, a small shell from one of the rockpools on the dash for Rosie.

He was still looking at the swell as he drove away, so he didn’t see the young man climbing gingerly down the long narrow ladder of Leighton Tower, and a few people at the bottom looking upwards, looking tired.

3

Rosie was ready. She opened the door to *The Messenger* offices.

‘*The Messenger*, please hold,’ one of the secretaries was saying into her headset. ‘Is Freddo down there, Rosie, do you know?’

‘Freddo?’

‘Oh, sorry,’ she laughed, turning slightly red. She covered the microphone. ‘Frank. *Freddo the frog*,’ she whispered. ‘Lookalikes.’

Rosie grinned. ‘Uh, I dunno,’ she said, holding up an uneaten sandwich in a paper bag. ‘I’ve been out.’

She headed down the corridor, past the room of deadline-fearing typesetters making an impressive racket on their keyboards; past subeditors swinging to the phone every now and then to check the spelling of a local councillor’s name; quickly past the desk of the eccentric editor in case he pulled her aside to pass on another story or two; past the overburdened and bored-shitless real estate writer, who had three or four thesauruses in front of her in an effort to find different words to describe kitchens in houses that were all the same; and ended up at Frank’s desk.

He still used a typewriter, insisted on it, despite the typesetters’ complaints. ‘You’ve gotta move with the times, Frank,’ they’d implore. ‘It takes ages to re-key your stories.’

‘Move with the times?’ he snorted. ‘I’m the only one around here doing that! And if advancement is what everyone wants, why did we just put Johnny Howard into the top job?’

Standard operating procedure: turn a conversation about outmoded office equipment into political commentary.

He patted his beloved machine and said, 'No way. This fella's more loyal than most people.' And he looked meaningfully at one of the reporters.

Another of Frank's pet topics: loyalty.

'Did any of you see that silly trumped-up cow on Channel Seven last night?' he said to no one in particular. 'We taught her everything she knows, that girl. As soon as she'd sucked us dry she was out the door.'

Now Rosie stood close to his desk, not really knowing what she was going to do.

'Have you got a minute?' she said.

'What did you get?' he said, nodding at her sandwich bag, standing up.

'Huh? Oh...ham and salad. They're in some kind of a food coma in that joint. I'm going to ask for pitta bread with hummus and sprouts one day, just to see how they react.'

Some staff looked up from screens and notes as Rosie and Frank walked out to the courtyard where people had lunch and cigarettes.

Rosie concentrated on how she was going to start this, how this would end.

'So Rosie-bosie, how'd you go this morning?' Frank asked.
How do you think I went, Franky-wanky?

'Well ...' She took a breath. 'I didn't go.'

He tried to look as though he wasn't surprised, but Rosie had seen this look before, and she knew it well; he was pissed off.

She went in to defend herself before he could engage in his ceremonial Tearing Strips Off Stupid Young Reporter ritual. As if from a distance, she heard her voice thin with exasperation and her pitch rise, but, worse, she was regurgitating all sorts of naive clichés: 'News is for informing people about what's going on around them; it's not about

satisfying morbid curiosities; it's not just about getting people to buy the paper.'

Frank looked at her with amusement.

Rosie wanted to slug him. There was a limit to how cynical you could be, surely?

'Rosie, I sent you on a job, and now we've lost a story — a good story.' He stared at her more seriously, voice searing. 'What are you — a reporter or just another bloody pipedreamer?'

Inside, phone calls had been hung up on, the radio turned down.

Rosie met Frank's eyes. 'It wasn't a good story. It was a shit story. And you're spot-on; I'm not really a reporter, if that's what it's all about.'

'For god's sake, Rosie! Don't you want to sink your teeth into something real out there? Our readers have *the right to know* what their local mental health service does when a kid goes there. One day it could be *their* kid. This is important stuff; it's uncomfortable, yes. But sometimes when there's a tragedy, following the trail of blood is what needs to happen. If comfortable's what you're looking for, go and talk to Sharyn in *Lifestyle* — isn't she doing a story on nail polish at the moment?' He paused to catch his breath, then said, 'The thing is ... you could be really good at this. If you'd just ...' He sighed.

Rosie stared at the ashtray. Did she hear him right? *Following the trail of blood?* She felt disgusted — but she could see Frank's reasoning too. Maybe she was just being pathetically naive?

He walked back into the office without her, letting the door slam shut.

Naive. She could live with that. Rosie still couldn't do it. She could live with that too.

4

The green Kingswood was parked outside the front of the house, frangipani poking over the bonnet. Rosie went in and dumped some old notes and her favourite thesaurus onto their bed.

Cray was sitting out the back in the shade with the paper, the blue teapot close at hand.

‘Hello!’ he said, confused, looking at his watchless wrist. ‘What’s the time?’

She kicked off her shoes and walked over the cool grass towards his patch of shade. ‘One, or something.’

He reached out for a cuddle.

‘How was your swim this morning?’ she grinned, deferring.

‘Ahhh, like Esperance water, like out of a bottle. And I had a forage in a couple of the rockpools further up in the reef.’

The water was Cray’s obsession, and he’d shared it with her from the day they met. The whole coastal world had opened up to her through him: reef breaks, wind direction, headlands, currents. Before Cray, she’d felt the coast wasn’t her territory. But Rosie was glad to be let in to this blue, buffeted place – to be really let in – and it was one of the things she loved most about him.

‘You didn’t go past the tower, did you?’ asked Rosie.

‘Leighton tower?’

She nodded.

‘Yeah. Why?’

‘Some guy was threatening to jump off it, apparently. Frank tried to get me to go down there. Talk about ambulance chasing! Arsehole.’

Cray grimaced. ‘What were you meant to do when you got there? Shout up a few questions?’

Rosie looked around the back garden, slightly dazed. She noted with weird relief that their back patio needed sweeping. ‘So I, um, quit. I... left. Gave *The Messenger* the flick.’

She scrunched and unscrunched her toes, and reached for the teapot. ‘So. I s’pose I’ll give this a refill.’

‘Well, hang on.’ Cray grabbed her hand, trying to stop her for a minute.

She blinked into the reinvented day. ‘Let me put the kettle on first.’

Cray watched Rosie walk towards the kitchen, holding the pot loose-wristedly; it might have dropped and smashed if she’d loosened her grip on it any further.

She *quit*.

He was stunned, impressed. He knew she’d not loved being at the paper, but she’d always justified it as a stepping-stone, a way in. If only he’d had that kind of backbone when he was in his early twenties.

Cray watched a honeyeater plop into their birdbath and preen itself on the side of the terracotta bowl. When it had flown off, he filled up the watering can, crackled across the leaves and topped it up till the water’s skin gripped at the edge. *Money*, he thought. *Bloody money. The stuff that gets you bread and milk and the latest LandCruiser is driving the world fucking bonkers – no one knows what they’re doing anymore, just do whatever it is for the money, accumulate the stuff like food in a bomb shelter, just because everyone else does the same. People can’t seem to bear the old brick barbie with a hotplate anymore, they need a top-of-the-range ‘outdoor kitchen’. And a three-car garage that’s nearly as big as their whole house. Justifying your*

crappy life by surrounding yourself with things provided by the money which is provided by the shit job that you absolutely hate. It was diagnosable, apparently: 'influenza'.

He nodded at the honeyeater, now in the fig tree, cocking its head at the shimmering water, and looked at Rosie through the kitchen window with pride.

Countless rockpools along that coast cup the small lives of anemones and barnacles. Strewed about in the rushing water, they come to rest on a jut of reef, bracing against the sudden cold barrages of the sea.

A hand plunges in. Resting on the pool bottom are broken pieces of shell, long vacated. The fingers sieve them like jewels, tiny flecks of the day, skin and sweat and the skin of others swirling perfectly into the solution.

5

Liza watched Sam run outside. He flailed his arms and yelled at a ginger cat that was pelting away, ears flat, towards a tree. It scaled the small gum looking back at the boy only when it reached the upper branches. Sam stared at it keenly.

Take that, cat, Liza thought. *You met the wrong Crowe today.*

Sam ran back inside, where Liza was slapping vegemite on thick slabs of wholemeal.

‘Gotta keep that cat *away*, Mum – they eat native birds, you know?’

Liza sighed. Sam kept everyone on their toes, even the local felines. ‘I haven’t seen that cat ever catch a bird, Sam, and until I do, it’s welcome in this house.’ *Besides, it’s good company,* she thought. It must have been Mrs Perry’s; everywhere else was too far away from the farmhouse. It was always coming in through the back door – paw hooked around the flyscreen – and, well, what harm could come from giving the friendly creature a drop of milk every now and then?

‘Now eat this.’ She passed Sam a plate with two bits of bread on it. ‘And no more snacks until your tea, okay?’

He looked pleadingly at her and said, ‘But the fairy wrens! I saw that cat stalking one on the weekend!’

‘Do you have any homework to do?’

‘Yessss. Practise my spelling words. And do my reading. But can I go on the Mac for just a little while, Mum?’

She looked at her watch, then nodded. ‘Half an hour, and then do your homework, okay, Sam?’

As he trotted down the corridor to his bedroom, she heard a faint *Okay, Mum* drift her way.

'Naaaaa!' Sam mimicked his Mac's 'on' sound as it booted up. He loved his computer, it was like having a secret companion in your bedroom – always there, waiting to start up, and a million different things to do on it. It was an old one, an LC 575, but he was hassling his folks for a 5400 for Christmas. Or maybe Christmas and birthday, seeing they were pretty expensive.

A year ago, when his uncle Mike last visited, he'd brought Sam a modem and had set him up with a dial-up account. Sam's dad had chucked a mega wobbly about it. He'd had a huge argument with Mike and raved on at him about *bloody asking one of us before you go and bloody do something like introducing a world of bloody rubbish to the kid*. Sam listened to the whole thing from his room, praying that he'd just get to keep the modem, which he did, but only after Mum had sorted the two of them out. She'd yelled, too, at both of them. She was the best. But she was strict about The Rules. Sam always had to ask if he could go online, and he was only allowed half an hour at a time. Except on weekends, when he sometimes got an hour.

So ever since then, Sam had been checking out some of the cool sites on the internet – and there were heaps. He clicked on one of his favourite sites, a sci-fi story, updated every day by some guy in the States.

The story just got better and better. He read it each day when he got home from school, after afternoon tea. It was mostly words, just a few pictures. He'd ask Mum, then run down to his room, which was pretty big, heaps of space for his star charts and models, and would power up his computer.

He knew Mum got cranky sometimes when he was on the net, but that was only when she was expecting someone to call and they couldn't get through because the modem was connected. Or when she was bored, waiting for Dad to come

back from the trees. But Sam also knew that no matter how long he was on the internet, he'd *always* get one of Mum's hugs before bed. The other night she'd nearly squashed him into a cardboard cutout kid.

'Will we still do this when I'm, like, *twenty*, Mum? Do the superbearhug thing?'

She'd nodded surely. 'Yep, we will.'

Nine-year-old Sam already felt squirmy at the thought, embarrassed, but kind of glad, too. He couldn't imagine being twenty. He reckoned he didn't have to worry for a while yet. It was a long way away.

Sam concentrated now as his eyes scanned the screen. Valstran was getting closer – it wouldn't be long until he took over Sawan country. Jeez, if only he had that 5400 and Netscape, he'd have faster download speed and better graphics, too. Maybe he could talk to Mike about it. Yeah, he'd mention it to Mike next time he was down, whenever that would be.

6

Ferg wandered through the tiny orchard, his hand lingering on the trunk of a knobbled, grey-brown plum tree as he passed. The late afternoon sun filtered through the leaves of orange trees, avocados, lemons, an almond and a pear. There was a hedge of blackberries, a tangle of raspberries. A grand old fig. All this old stuff. He couldn't imagine his father planting it all, back in those early days. Trees need that, he thought. Long-term vision. You think you can't be bothered with the waiting, the *years*, but the things always grow, and transform the place with them. And it wasn't even business for his old man — Jack still had the dairy farm to look after, to keep turning over, day in, day out.

The orchard had been for Ferg's mum, for Pip. She was battling with the boys and was hopelessly homesick, she once told him. When they first built the house, it was full of fleas, didn't even have a proper floor, and she was pregnant. 'That's why your dad planted that orchard, to make things a little better for us.'

Ferg wished his old man were still around, would've loved to have a beer with him, hear more about those early years, see his mum with those grinning, shining eyes again. He knew that he and Sam and Liza weren't always such good company for her. He wondered if Pip looked at him and Liza, at how things were between them.

A few dry white skeletons in paddocks reminded him of how his father's generation had cleared the land, hacking away a ring of bark from the trunks, waiting for the things to die. Trees used to be their enemies, his dad had said when Ferg told him about the tree-farm idea. They'd only got in

the way of farming the land. ‘Good on you, son,’ Jack had said from the couch. ‘You’re taking this old place into the next century. That’s the way it’s gotta be.’

Dairy farming wasn’t the staple of this town anymore, not since the arrival of the alternative lifestylers in the seventies and the vineyards and now the tourists. Things had changed for the farmers around Margaret River; they’d had to change. Ferg grew Tasmanian blue gums on the property now, but he kept a small stock of milking cows, and the orchard, to remind him of how it all began. There was big money to be had from the blue gums, and while Ferg and Liza had only begun the business a few years ago, things were looking pretty good. It had been a worry when they’d taken the plunge, and the bank was worried too, but they’d done their research, and Ferg’d completed a few units in environmental science out at the ag college, where he’d been the oldest student by a couple of decades.

As for his brother – well, Mike had pissed off to the city.

Ferg took out the thermos of coffee he’d made that morning, realising as he swirled it around that he hadn’t put any sugar in it. He swallowed the creamy stuff, trying not to taste the bitterness of it on his tongue.