

South Westerly

(2449 words)

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They're not more than ten metres away when he notices the shotgun.

A glint of metal, a flurry of motion as the driver finds something to conceal it with. Too late and too obvious to keep on driving so Colin slows to a stop anyway and hopes the reporter has the good sense to keep her trap shut.

"You right there mate?"

The driver nods, not meeting his eye, mutters something about being sorry and be out of there soon.

They drive straight off after that, the girl all antsy that there'd been no discussion about the trespass.

"Got your notepad there?" Colin keeps his eyes on the rear vision mirror, recites the number plate.

They'd been on the adjacent property the last hour or so. Long enough that it's starting to bug him that he's forgotten her name.

Next door was a bit of a showpiece for the company. Nice bit of reveg with lots of birds and other animals using it as a corridor. He'd played it cool when an echidna had ambled across their path – as if it were something that happened all the time.

He'd noticed the padlock missing from the gate immediately as they drove past the next property.

"Ah shit", he said, sounding more annoyed than he'd wanted to.

"What's wrong?"

"Padlock's gone from the gate."

He could see a flash of white metal a few rows in and the adrenalin began to surge. The first pair of red hands he'd come across since this business began.

"Have a bit of a problem with people stealing firewood sometimes."

"Really? You actually get people coming in and cutting down the bluegums for firewood?"

Christ she really was green.

"Nah just fallen stuff." Not bluegums, old native stuff. Red gums, sugar gum, that sort of thing.

Might just have a quick look while we're here if you've got a few minutes?"

Meg shrugged her shoulders. She was new and the boss had her on a short leash. Was probably already expecting her back.

The cops had told Colin not to approach if he did happen to spring anyone on any of their properties but to call them with the rego and let them deal with it. But there'd been a lot of these lately and he had the shits. And, if he were totally honest about it, he was probably of a mind to perform a little in front of whatsername.

“Is there anything you can do about it?”

Firewood theft didn't sound like much of a story to Meg, but she was a journalist and supposed to ask questions. Even if she were bored out of her mind.

This was her home country but only in a technical sense. This was the first time she'd been here since she was three – that's when her mum had died. She saw now how ridiculous it had been to have expected some sort of connection.

She blamed the grief, wild and unpredictable. That and copious amounts of Stone's Green Ginger Wine. Such an embarrassing abuse of alcohol she wondered how she could have taken the piss out of herself at a time like that. Any other self-respecting mourner would have filled their recycling bin with empty vodka bottles. God, even chardonnay would have had more credibility.

And the internet. It just shouldn't be so easy to find a job on the other side of the country. Even if they weren't very good jobs.

With any luck she'd be sacked soon and she could give up and go back to her most recent home.

The first week here she'd found it strangely touching that the flowering gums lining some of the town streets were the same as those back in her corner of West Australia. Now the sight of them made her feel queasy out-of-place feeling, like she'd ducked down to the supermarket in her trackies and run into an old lover with their new lover.

Her father's stories about her mother had inevitably meandered their way into the wildly improbable and she had no way of knowing what was really real. Like the tale of her mother at a B&S Ball in a dress made from garbage bags. Like the one about her lunging at a snake in the chook shed with a child's (Meg's) toy rake. And did he ever really have a picture of her somewhere, dancing on the bar at one of the local pubs, with a pink wig on to cover her bald head?

Meg had one peculiar and possibly improbable memory of her own – her mum reading to her from a book, naming the animals on each page for Meg to repeat. She couldn't say 'elephant' properly, and her mum had sung "*Hey ho, hey-di-ho, the elephant is so slow.*" Meg had called elephants *hey-di-hos* for as long as she could remember.

She had been miserably sheltered from the slow onslaught of her mother's death. It shamed her how little she could recall of that time even given her age. She remembered presents being thrust upon her without any such plausible excuse as a birthday or Christmas. Closed doors. And honey sandwiches. She must have liked them back then.

Colin was telling her that there used to be a sign on one of the other properties saying it was under police surveillance hoping it might act as a deterrent.

Meg shakes her head, draws herself back into the car, to the current conversation.

“And?”

“Some bastard stole the sign.

Left another one saying ‘thanks for the firewood’.”

Mal was an old-school country copper in the ‘keep an eye out for your kids, point ‘em in the straight and community-minded path kind of way’.

When Colin called in the rego he didn’t need to check his notes to ask if was a rusty white Fairlane.

“Yeah – you know the guy?”

“His wife just rang to report him missing. Worried as all getout. You know that accident last week with the two Japs?” He was the truck driver.”

“Ah shit...”

Colin makes a grab for the girl's notebook and knocks the pen from her hand. It gives him some mean satisfaction to see it clack its way into the gap between her seat and the centre console. There'd be no retrieving it in a hurry.

Could kick himself for not mentioning to the cops there was a reporter in the car. One of the things he liked about his job was being able to get on and do his own thing. On his own.

The 'PR' thing had been his boss's idea. 'Get some positive industry stories out there' he'd said. Colin was inherently mistrustful of journalists and now he saw all the myriad ways this simple excursion was going to go horribly wrong.

He glances down at the notebook in his lap and sees 'Meg Ryan' written in a thin line of black text on the front. Meg. She mustn't have mentioned her surname – he wouldn't have forgotten her name if she had.

“Mal – there's a Browning keeping him company in the front passenger seat.”

Over the hands-free they can both clearly hear him swear and tell someone else in the room the guy had his shotgun with him.

He stares down the girl in a way he hopes will leave no doubt at how quiet she should stay.

“Yeah... the missus said it was missing. ” Addressing Colin directly this time.

“We’ll get out there now.”

“You want me to go back and talk to him till you get there?”

“No mate. We try and keep guns and unrelated members of the public apart if we can help it.

He hopes Meg can’t tell how relieved he feels to be told not to be heroic.

On the news people always say they weren’t being heroic when they rescued the five kids and family dog from a fire, just doing what anyone would have done. But Colin suspects he probably wouldn’t have.

“Cheers mate.”

He’s in for it when he ends the call.

“You never mentioned anything about a shotgun – where was the fucking shotgun?”

The expletive hangs shocking around his ears, but warms her to him. Reminds him that she’s just a human being.

“Well apart from people stealing stuff we also get people shooting stuff. Deer mostly. Get used to looking out for these things.

He threw something over it when he saw us coming.”

She sits back in her seat, thinking.

“Poor bugger.

You don’t think we should go back?”

“A, cops just said not to, and B, how good’s it going to look if they turn up and see I’ve brought a journo to a crime scene?”

She pulls her seatbelt forward a little, twists on her seat so her knee is pointing towards him.

“You reckon he’s going to top himself?”

“Christ I hope not. I’ll have to file a report.”

He smiles even though it’s not the slightest bit funny.

He drops her back in town, giving her the predictable speech about how the only story he wants to see in the paper is one about echidnas and red-tailed black cockatoos.

Meg is suitably reassuring. She doesn’t have the killer instinct of a real journalist. Even by country standards. Especially here. In the city you could file stories without any awareness of the consequences for the people involved.

Here the people involved were people you passed in the street every day. It was too much. Too personal.

There'd be hell to pay if the story came out later on and her boss found out she'd known about it all along...

He'd sent her out to that accident scene. Breaking in the new kid she thought, with a bit of shock and gore.

A couple of young Japanese guys – investors in one of the local bluegum plantation companies – had allegedly spotted a koala walking along the other side of the road and spun the car around to get a closer look. Unfortunately they'd done it just before a rise in the road and gave the truck driver coming from the opposite direction no time to avert a collision. The truck was written off, as were the two Japanese investors. An elderly couple came across the scene moments later just in time to see the responsible koala skedaddle up a tree.

By the time Meg arrived, the truck driver was sitting by the side of the road with a blanket around his shoulders and despite all the blood she could clearly make out a lot of nothing on his face. That nothingness had struck her more than anything else about the accident, but it wasn't anything she could write about. Later she found out that one of the young men had been a month or so away from being a new father. She wrote about that instead.

As soon as Colin's car is out of view she sidles off towards the police station. She has a good 200 metres to figure out how she can extract the information she already has from a third party without attracting suspicion.

By the time she gets to the front steps she still has no idea what she is going to say. Through the glass panel in the door she can see a small middle-aged bird-woman sitting on the bench in the waiting room. Meg can tell, just by looking at her, that there is plenty riding on the right person coming through the door.

She glances briefly in Meg's direction as she pushes against the door and then does a white-faced double-take.

"Marj?"

Meg stops and the weight of the door knocks her slightly backwards.

"I'm Meg" she says uncertainly, like she's not sure if she is.

She steps clear of the door. Waits till it clicks back into place.

"My mum was called Marjorie."

The woman stands, smoothing her skirt, or maybe wiping sweat from her hands. There are dark semi-circles of sweat radiating from her armpits even though there's been a cool south-westerly blowing all week. There's a spider-vein crease on the side of her skirt where she's missed with the iron.

"Dear God – spitting image..."

The woman takes a small step forwards, stops.

I'm sorry love, stupid thing to say...

But what are you doing here? Where's Brian? Where's your dad?"

"He passed away a few months ago. Heart attack."

"Orphaned..." she breathes the word apologetically.

Meg thinks she might not have realised she's said the word out loud.

I'm so sorry love.

I'm so glad you're here" she says, suddenly clasping Meg's hand.

Meg feels very hot herself. She wants to pull her hand away. She wants a hug. She wants to ask a million questions. She feels a pang and it is a sudden and painful pang the size of a London bus.

"I've got a job here, with the paper," she begins, knowing she's on shaky ground.

"I was at an accident last week... The driver – was he..."

"No-one's saying anything..."

Meg glances over her shoulder. There's a young copper looking up at them with mild interest through the glass counter but he doesn't look like he's going to interrupt any time soon.

"I think they know where he is but they won't tell me anything."

She leans in close to Meg.

“He hasn’t spoken since it happened...”

And finally, in a pleading whisper,

“The gun’s missing.”

Meg leads her back to the bench, waits as long as she thinks she should before asking if there’s anywhere he might go.

“No. I don’t know. The family farm got broken up and sold off to the bluegums ten years back when the wool prices went bad. There is nowhere else.”

Meg holds her breath. Holds her tongue. Holds the woman’s hand through an immense span of silence.

“You knew my mum?”

The woman’s face shifts and re-focuses into a tragi-comic smile.

“You used to play with my daughter. Her birthday is just a week after yours.”

She laughs then, so hard and unexpectedly that the young copper stands up to see what’s going on. This is not, after all, a place for laughter.

“Your mum was so wild... You know – we went to the Lake Bolac B&S Ball one year when we were around your age. She said she was sick of always getting her

dresses ruined at these things, so she made a dress especially for the occasion – out of garbage bags! What a nutter. What a gorgeous nutter.”

Meg gets the giggles then. Sets the older woman off again and the two of them make a right giggly picture.

“Let’s go for a drive,” says Meg.

And has no idea what will happen next.