

The Policeman's Wife

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When the young city girl Grace MacKenzie met Liam O'Connor she was finishing a degree in journalism at Curtin University. It was 1984 and she fell in love with the young policeman with the soft brown eyes when she first saw him. Grace's parents were dismayed at this rather sudden love interest which threatened to de-rail their younger daughter's grand career and travel plans. But in the end, Mr and Mrs MacKenzie realised (as all parents ultimately do) that their parental attentions were no longer desired and that all that was required of them was to offer their best wishes, hold their tongues and hope for the best.

Grace and Liam were soon married at St Joseph's Church in Subiaco and their babies quickly followed; Caitlin, Alexander and Thomas. Unlike Liam, Grace was not raised Catholic and although her new husband's large family welcomed her with sincere warmth, she was not at one with the essential element of the family, which was always to remain mysterious to her. Grace loved her husband deeply and wanted only that he be happy.

Liam was a 'general duties' policeman and as they settled into life of domestic predictability, crowded as it was with the necessary paraphernalia of life with babies, it became apparent to Grace that Liam was being harmed by his job as a policeman. Her husband would come home after duty at the central lock-up and go directly to the bathroom to shower. Liam would then place his clothes in the washing machine because he felt that the stink of the lock-up threatened to infuse his hide. On most shifts Liam was required to see drunken brawls, neglected children, take reports of sexual abuse and perversion, burglary and theft. Each day the blue uniform he wore upon himself was despised, feared and hated by new and different people. It seemed as though the city provided an endless supply of hatred. Grace could see that Liam was becoming transformed from a kind patient man into a tired, angry cynic who felt he could never help anybody.

It was Grace who urged Liam to accept a three-year posting to Killaburing, a small town only a few hours from Perth on the Great Eastern Highway. She could see nothing but relief for their little family. The children were still very young and so they would not be uprooted from schooling. Their pace of life would slow – Liam would have one shift instead of the three alternating ones. He could come home for lunch to the little weatherboard cottage that was the police house – Grace could walk to town for groceries and errands with the children each day. It was indeed a charming scenario. Grace had happy thoughts of planting vegetables and herbs, making curtains for the little cottage and painting the fence. She was full of young mother notions about life in a small country town with idealisations that had never been disabused by previous experience. She happily made arrangements to transfer their home for the next three years to the little township with a population of less than a thousand. The police cottage was on the southern side of town – overlooking a wheat field. There was a high, solitary tree on the fence line and the vast blue sky was magnificent with promise.

"This will be the best thing we could have done" she said to Liam as she admired his new khaki uniform and rabbit-felt hat.

During their first week of happy unpacking at Killaburing, Liam and Grace were welcomed by Sergeant Roderick Jones and the traffic officer Constable Rory Cusack and their families at a barbeque dinner behind the police station. The sergeant, a man who might have been quite handsome except for a ridiculously distended gut that hung over his belt buckle, greeted her; "Well, hello blondie". Grace tried to smile as she shook hands. Introduced to the rest of the group, the traffic policeman and his wife said little. They were to be leaving their posting soon and delivered this information with "Thank God"- it like an Amen. Grace questioned the wife, ignoring her folded arms, but she only replied with resentful enunciation "Nothing ever happens around here". It was to be her final word on the matter and Grace was satisfied

enough with that summation. She herself had not come to the little town with the hope that it would be exciting. Grace thereafter did not speak very much, her instinct was to listen.

Whenever the subject of prisoners came up, Grace soon realised that it was assumed that it they were talking about Aboriginals unless otherwise indicated. The main reason for arrest and incarceration was drunkenness. Sergeant Jones – expertly tossing a quick succession of crushed beer cans into the bin, was as loud as he was rotund. He was letting Liam know that he lamented the fact that these days you had to "do things by the book", and "in the good old days they just took them out". "Out?" asked Grace? "Out where?" The sergeant's wife reacted hotly, telling her husband; "Shut up Roderick".

The traffic guy looked amused and turned to Liam "So, what's going on in the city these days?"

Later at home, Grace asked Liam: "What did Roderick mean when he said "the good old days when they just used to take prisoners out?"

"Don't take any notice of him Grace, it was the beer talking"

But Grace knew that this terrible glimpse was not going to go away. Putting her youngest baby to bed, she felt very uneasy.

When Caitlin was old enough for kindergarten a few months later, Grace met with other waiting mothers at the cyclone wire gate of the little demountable kindergarten classroom at the edge of the district primary school. She was taken aback by how completely ignored she was by most of the assemblage. The few that showed any initial friendliness were those who were inappropriately inquisitive and when Grace did not seem to enjoy the rough attentions of these women, they too subsequently ignored her.

Grace felt this rejection by the other mother's keenly and her confidence was shaken. Upon late night analysis however, she began to understand that from the local people's point of

view, she and her family were part of a long chain of temporary residents in their midst and perhaps time and energy spent befriending a police family was in the main wasted. Grace was relieved that at least the local children did not share this social economy and befriended openly and instinctively. Caitlin, who was a tender hearted child, soon partnered with Aimee, a dark-haired girl with large brown eyes. Grace realised that the child was part-aboriginal. Aimee and Caitlin became close playmates. Grace saw them in the playground digging in the sand pit when she passed by the kindergarten cyclone wire.

"Aimee's Mum catches snakes" Caitlin announced one evening at dinner.

"Really?" said Grace, taken aback "What does she do with them?"

"Puts 'em in a bag" Caitlin responded.

"What for?" Grace asked.

Caitlin shrugged "Dunno".

Grace presently identified Aimee's mother, a dour woman who always waited in an old ute, parked away from the small melee of mothers greeting their kindergartners. Aimee, trailing an old backpack, would make her way to the vehicle each day. Grace soon approached the woman and bent toward the closed window to ask the other woman if Aimee could come to play one day. The woman looked middle aged and was dark-eyed like her daughter. She reluctantly wound the window down but did not smile. She looked like she had not smiled for years. Her reply was slow and succinct. "We don't have much time for playing" as Aimee scrambled into the passenger side of the ute.

"My name's Grace, anyway..." Grace said.

The woman nodded "Hello Grace" she said. Then she started the ute and drove away.

After that day, Aimee would pass through the kindergarten gate and go quickly to her mother. They would drive away, without a sideways look. Grace asked Liam about the family.

"Yea, that's the Crosses – the Dad - Warren Cross, is a nasty character – he's a mulesing contractor. He belts the wife we think, but she never complains, so there is nothing we can do. There is another daughter, Elsa I think her name is, his step-daughter, who works at the co-op".

Grace wondered at Liam's new attitude of solidarity with his police colleagues; "He belts his wife *we* think... there's nothing *we* can do..." Then she realised she had seen this girl Elsa at the co-op. She was quietly efficient and did not speak. The next time Grace went to the co-op she approached Elsa. "Hello, I'm Grace – my daughter Caitlin is friends with your little sister Aimee - at Kindy". Elsa looked up, she smiled and nodded. Grace noticed how very pretty she was when she did so. The girl then seemed to think better of her response and looked away, busying herself with placing red and white packets of salt upon a shelf. Grace persisted. "Aimee is a lovely child" she said. The girl seemed to be hurrying to finish what she was doing so she could get away. Grace felt strangely nonplussed at her easy elimination from this simple social discourse. "Well, see you later" she turned and glimpsed Elsa's face. The young woman did not look annoyed or angry. She looked afraid.

Grace left the co-op, feeling a little befuddled. When Liam arrived home at lunch-time, she told him what had happened.

"What is it with this bloody town?" she asked, frowning – do they think I have typhoid or something?"

"Don't worry Grace, it's just a small town going about its business. Anyway, I understand the Cross girl has probably been abused by her stepfather, the co-op manager mentioned one day that she hurries away after work and gets upset if she's held up, worried she'll be late home..."

"Why doesn't someone talk to the mother, Liam? Aren't there social workers or something out here that can help women like them? What about little Aimee, growing up in a violent home like that?"

"It's not like the city, Grace. People mind their own business. If she wanted to get away from the old man, she would find a way to do it".

"Maybe she has nowhere to go." Grace insisted. "Maybe she is afraid he would track her down..."

"Look, Grace, what do you expect us to do? We can't just go out there and say 'excuse me, Mrs Cross, but my wife says that you need help and that I have to insist that you ask for it...'"

"Don't be sarcastic Liam" said Grace miserably. She shook her head "I just don't understand this place."

Liam put his arm around his wife and kissed her forehead "Why don't you go down to Perth this weekend and see your sister?"

"But then I'd have to come back!" She retorted.

As she drove west the next day with the children in the back, the grey stretch of the Perth-Kalgoorlie water pipeline flickered away on her right. Grace reflected on the lonely suicide of its engineer C.Y. O'Connor, who rode his horse into the sea at Fremantle and shot himself in the head with a revolver. She felt she could fully understand his frame of mind.

After a couple of long nights in the warm glow of her sister's good humour, the surreality of her situation in Killaburing became less intense. Grace decided to venture out of her social isolation by writing some freelance submissions for small publications – The Farmer's Weekly came to mind and she bought a copy at the co-op the next time she was there. Grace thought the pulp magazine looked an interesting possibility, reading a few article headings,

Grace imagined herself interviewing local farmers and perhaps a journalistic voice on their behalf would be welcomed.

A few days later, little Caitlin reported that her friend Aimee was absent from Kindy. That evening Liam told Grace about the discovery of the body of Warren Cross. "The publican found him dead in his truck on the old Doodlakine road" Liam said. "The truck was parked by the side of the road, he was lying across the seat...AND there was a snake under the seat – a King Brown" Liam grimaced with horror.

Grace was shocked. "What? So...he died of snake-bite, in his truck?"

"Looks like it, the doctor who pronounced him dead said it looked classic – swollen leg, drooping eyes. Apparently, the local ranger says, King Brown's have a lot of venom.

They've taken blood samples, but for sure it was the snake. Cross must have pulled over when he felt the bite. It's a wonder he didn't panic and hit a tree or something... a snake in the cab with him."

Grace decided to go to the Cross house the next day to offer her condolences. She took with her a cake. The old weatherboard place stood alone at the top of a large bare paddock. There was no garden around the house and it stood on stumps above the desolate ground. Grace knocked at the peeling wooden door. She was about to leave the cake on the step, when the door opened and Aimee's mother stood looking at her.

"Hello" Grace began. "Look, I don't even know your name... but I heard about what happened – and I just wanted to see if Aimee was all right.... and you... to see if you are all right?"

Grace trailed off.

"Aimee is in the city" The woman replied.

"Is she? It must be terrible for her – her father... A shock to you all."

The woman nodded slightly. She did not take her eyes off Grace.

"Do you need anything?" asked Grace. But then Grace saw a small sedan approaching the house. It pulled up on the other side of the water tank, next to the house. It was Elsa, and she was looking at Grace's white station wagon with interest, then she saw Grace on the steps and froze. The girl's mouth was agape, her eyes widened and the colour disappeared from her face. Her mother suddenly became more animated. "She's come to see if Aimee's all right Elsa". The girl still did not move and she continued staring at Grace.

Grace spoke "Anyway – don't hesitate to call, you know, if you need anything... It's a terrible thing..." She thrust the cake toward the woman.

Aimee's mother nodded and said "Thank you." Grace retreated down the steps and the two women were in the house with the door closed before Grace had got into her car.

Arriving home, Grace went to collect the children's toys and tricycles from the front yard. The solitary tree in the paddock opposite looked like a writhing nude and the breadth of the sky was monstrous.

Grace could hear Caitlin's childish voice in her head.

"Aimee's Mum catches snakes..."