

BLOOD RIVER

TONY CAVANAUGH

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HANGING WITH GLOOM AND SADNESS, THE SKY WAS FULL.

With dark clouds of silver blue, crackles of grey and black, black and grey, heavy across to the horizon, ripples of thunder getting closer, closer, closer, rolling across the ether towards me. Pulsating me, twining me, scaring me. And then –

Maybe dissipating. Maybe not. And the rain, deep in the desert. Coming towards me. To all of us. I see it now. I see it all. I didn't, not then, not back then, when I was seventeen. When I –

The city waited. We all did.

The flood was coming. A deluge. Brisbane had been cascaded with rain for almost three weeks. The sky, a low ceiling of pulsing bursts, ebbing grey and black, lifting its curtains to sheets of silver water. We haven't seen a blue sky in three weeks.

Like the city, I was about to go under.

We all were.

PART I

LARA

Oh Mary, don't you weep, don't you mourn

Oh Mary, don't you weep, don't you mourn

Pharaoh's army got drowned

Oh Mary don't you weep

If I could I surely would

Stand on the rock where Moses stood

Pharaoh's army got drowned

Oh Mary don't you weep

WRONG GIRL

1999

IS THAT A POLICE CAR?

It's four in the afternoon and I'm upstairs, looking down through my bedroom windows. We live on Ascot Hill and the corkscrew of our narrow street winds its way up to the top. Up to us.

The sky has fallen so low that the clouds are touching the surface of the streets and through this wall of shifting black, grey then white, I'm watching the pulse of a red light. Snap. Then blue. Snap.

From down at the base of the hill, the pulsing snap-snaps of an emergency vehicle's lights have been drawing closer. Towards us. Sometimes the lights, fuzzy through the veil of fog, vanish for a moment, as if the vehicle is lost, then they appear again, on another side of the hill. Making its slow, spiralling journey upwards.

Is that a police car?

Maybe someone has died, up here in the quiet suburb, so still and wet that there are no signs of life outside. We're all indoors, all waiting for more rain, for the flood and then for the skies to finally open once more returning the sight of a blue sky.

It's been raining all day. Again.

In the tendrils of mist, white, then grey then black, canopies of trees hang low, as if the rain is pushing them down. Some branches touch the broken concrete footpaths. Purple jacaranda flowers, shaken in the storm that sped across the hill, litter our street, so tight that only one car can edge up or down at a time.

Whatever the vehicle is, if inside are police officers or ambulance workers or maybe even firemen, it comes in silence. There is no siren. Just pulsing, flashing lights of brilliant red and ominous blue.

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IT WAS A police car. Coming for me.

I heard Mum open the front door, a guy saying he was a police officer. He and his partner wanted to ask me some questions and a moment later I heard: 'Jen!' being called up the stairs and I walked down, not at all sure why a police officer would want to talk to me.

All the school stuff, that'd been resolved; detentions, mea culpas and onwards we march and anyway – it was just school stuff. So, I was totally bewildered and nervous as I reached the bottom of the staircase.

There were two cops standing in the living room.

She wore tight black jeans and a black t-shirt and he wore a dark blue suit, pale yellow shirt with a blue paisley tie. She wore Doc Marten's and he had shiny patent leather brown shoes. She was Asian, tall, at least one eighty centimetres, with dyed blonde platinum hair and a gun tucked into a holster tucked into her hip. I couldn't see his gun but there was a bulge under his jacket. He was a lot older than her. She must have been mid-to-late twenties. He was from that old-guy age which starts to become indefinable after a person turns forty, or so it seems to me at the age of seventeen. Maybe he was in his fifties or sixties. How do you tell? He looked as though he'd been in the navy. He looked weather-beaten. Kind blue eyes but he could smash your head in. Without warning; that's the impression he gave. He was short, quite a bit shorter than her and wind-swept and had a 1960's crew cut. Barrel chested and massive biceps. They were smiling as if we were all about to go on a picnic. She was pretty, with dark eyes. She had the brisk and efficient thing going on. She looked dangerous. Dangerous-smart, not dangerous-smash-your-head-in. They were trying to lull me with their smiles, disarm me, make me think that there was nothing wrong.

There was a rising fear. I knew I was in trouble, big trouble. My head began to spin in a kaleidoscope of colliding, possible scenarios, me wanting to grab onto a wedge of *Oh, this is what it's about* so I could quickly place myself in this sudden and unexpected twist to the thus-far banal journey of me, Jen White, seventeen years old. What are they doing here, staring at me?

Stay in control Jen. Stay on the life raft. It's a misunderstanding.

‘Hi Jen. It’s Jen, right?’ asked the woman.

Yes.

‘Hi. I’m Detective Constable Lara Ocean, and this is my colleague, his name is Billy Waterson, and we just want to ask you a few questions.’

Okay. I kept staring at the gun tucked into her black leather holster. How heavy is it? I wondered. Has she ever shot it?

‘You want to sit down? Hi, you’re Jen’s mum, right?’ she asked.

Yeah. The woman cop Lara Ocean pointed to the Balinese couches, over-stuffed with white cushions.

Mum just nodded as she went to sit. She was doing her wobbling thing. It’s what me and Anthea call the VX effect. Vodka and Xanax. Breakfast of champions.

‘Great. Good. Do you want to sit next to Jen as we ask her some questions?’

Mum fell backwards into the couch. Turned to me as I sat next to her and smiled, a smile from Jupiter because it’s not Earth.

Lara Ocean and the older cop sat next to one another on the couch opposite. Between us lay a long wooden coffee table, also from Bali. Dad’s art magazines piled up on one side. Mum’s travel magazines on the other.

‘Are you okay for us to ask Jen a couple of questions, Missus White?’

No, I thought.

‘Yes’, said Mum, haltingly.

I sat with my hands clasped in my lap, staring at the Moroccan carpet beneath the coffee table. Dad trades in crafts from the Maghreb but mostly in Aboriginal art. He’s never at home. He used to tell me stories, made-up stories, to get me to asleep. He stopped doing that a long time ago. After I begged him to.

Stay in control Jen, stay on the life raft.

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‘NO ONE REMEMBERS where they were on certain days or nights – I mean, who travels with a diary and cross-references that stuff?’ She smiled and laughed. The man cop, Billy, also laughed.

Me too. Funny joke. Anything to make them like me.

‘But Jen, can you tell us where you were on the night of November sixteen this year?’

No ...

What’s happening? Why are they here, staring at me? What have I done? I haven’t done anything, have I?

Everything suddenly went very still, like a freeze-frame in a movie. I turned to look outside, at a new torrent of rain and I imagined that life needed to go into rewind now – press the button Jen – and that the rain would be sucked back up into the sky and I would be transported back into my bedroom window, looking down, into the black, grey and white mist, tendrils and gloom, watching as the lights of the police car were receding, that the press-reverse button had worked and life was returning to normal. There. See. The red blue snap-snap of silent warnings going backwards, sucked down into the clouds hovering on the hill of narrow roads, backwards they retreat, into a darkness. There. See. They have gone. The lights, they have returned to another world. Not mine. They came from darkness and that’s where they have returned.

‘Jen?’

I turned back to face them, smiling, like we were all going on that picnic together.

‘Jen, we’re going to ask you to come with us to the station where we can do a formal interview. Missus White, you’ll come down with us. Your daughter is under-age and she needs to have a parent or guardian present as we question her.’

‘What is this about?’ asked Mum. Finally.

I was quivering. I thought I was going to pee my pants.

Anthea, who is sixteen going on seventeen, appeared at the crevice of the door to the kitchen. She’d been listening.

She was shaking. More than me. She was staring into me with a: *What is happening? There are cops in the house?*

I try to give her a reassuring smile – it’s okay, it’s just a weird fuck-up. There were tears rolling down her face because she knew that we were in an alternative universe and it is bad, bad, bad. I dragged my gaze away from her after sending what I hoped was (but I don’t think it was) a look of reassurance; *Hey, it’s going to*

be fine, it's going to be okay.

She didn't buy it; she knew I was lying. Because she saw the fear in my face. As I felt the fear in my stomach.

'Jen is a person of interest in an investigation; aside from that, we can't really say anything until we get to the station,' said the old guy, Billy. Speaking for the first time.

Why was it her who'd been doing all the talking? Because she's not a man and three times my age, I figured. I figured they, the cops, had agreed on a game plan before they walked in. You do the kid because you're a girl and you're not that much older than her. She'll like you, she'll reach out to you and want to tell you stuff. You and her, Lara and Jen, you'll connect.

He leaned forward. Billy Waterson. He smelled of something ridiculously sweet. He said in a British accent that reminded me of the actor Michael Caine:

'Now, Jen, Missus White: there is nought be alarmed about.'

Which is when I categorically knew for sure that my life would never be the same again.

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I WAS TAKEN, along with Mum, out through the front door and down to the police car at the bottom of the driveway. It had stopped raining. But the sky was still dark with deep blue-grey clouds. The trees in our front garden dripping, the street gleaming wet silver and covered with fallen flowers. Water running down driveways and into the gutters. We lived on the top of Ascot Hill, one of the wealthiest suburbs in the city, where all the houses were big, old wooden Queenslanders with wraparound verandas.

They say the Brisbane River, down at the bottom of the hill, will burst its banks. They say the city will flood.

My new best friend, Detective Constable Lara Ocean, was gripping my arm, guiding me, staring straight ahead like a robocop. I'd almost rather she had her gun stuck into my back; the grip of her tensile fingers was like an animal's claw. Maybe she was anxious about leading an underage girl to their waiting car. I still had no idea what was going on.

But I knew it was a fucked-up mistake, that I was in big trouble. I was starting to get pissed off.

I've been told I need to work on this. Anger. My anger which seems to roll inside me any time I lose control of a situation. Focus Jen. If something happens which is outside of what you've planned – and it will Jen, it will; the unexpected happens to us every day, all the time – then do not resort to anger, lashing out. Take it easy and let it roll.

I imagined the neighbours, in all the old houses around us, up here on the hill, were staring at me, through windows, reminding themselves how odd I was, how Goth I was, how I went out at midnight with a skateboard, how violent I was towards their stuck-up daughters at school, how the devil cursed me with one blue eye and one green, like David Bowie but not like David Bowie because I was a catastrophe, an aberration in the cloistered streets of boring-town. Well, fuck them, I hope they all die, get swept away in the coming flood, down the Brisbane River and out into the ocean.

Lara put her hand on the top of my head and pushed me into the back of the car.

Take it easy Jen and let it roll.

She didn't speak, Miss Lara. Didn't say a word. I sat on the back seat. It was an unmarked police car, which looked totally obvious because they are brand new, totally clean and have a clutch of ariels on the back window, like something from *My Favourite Martian*, an old black and white TV show I used to watch, along with *Mr Ed*, the talking horse and Mum crawled in after me and the door closed on both of us. I reached for Mum's hand but it was soft and damp like a noodle and I took a deep breath as Lara slid into the driver's seat and Mister Billy with the shiny-shoes slid into the passenger seat and she glanced up at me through the rear-vision mirror and, for the merest of moments, we just stared at one another and I wondered if she really believed I was somehow involved in something to do with the police or had I stumbled down Alice's hole, into another world.

'Sorry,' I said to her, 'What department are you from? I don't think you mentioned it.'

'We're from Homicide,' she said, then turned her gaze to the

road ahead, put the car into gear and buckled in her seat belt.

I thought I could see Anthea standing by the front door.

Wet leaves and purple flowers had stuck to their windscreen. Lara turned on the wipers and they swished, this way and that, as we began to drive off.

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