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THE AUSTRALIAN

TELL ME LIES

Featuring
a sneak peek
of *THE LAST
GUESTS*

'one of our freshest talents' *NZ LISTENER*

J.P. POMARE

THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *CALL ME EVIE* AND *IN THE CLEARING*

TELL
ME
LIES

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PROLOGUE

'THE NEXT TRAIN to depart from Platform One is the 9:05 Flinders Street Line stopping all stations to Flinders Street.'

She takes the steps quickly, her hand slides along the rail. She is dishevelled, her mouth set in a pale line. There are a dozen or so people on the platform but she sets her sights on a man, standing there in a sweatshirt, a blue hat on his head and duffel bag slung over his shoulder. He has his back to her, gazing down at the phone in his hand.

Waiting in the shade on the platform, she glances back up the steps towards the street, then watches the man until the tracks begin to sing, a subtle high-pitched shriek that grows into a grumble.

The man looks up now, turning his head and watching down the tracks for the oncoming train. A light at first that grows brighter and brighter. It's loud now, so loud he doesn't hear her striding forward. The man turns back, raises his hands in defense, but half a second too late. She shoves him with all of her strength. The train is gliding into the station. His weight shifts; a gasp. Then he's falling. His body thuds against the concrete and rails. The train driver doesn't have time to apply the brakes; there is no time to do anything.

Reporter: Early reports have emerged of a yet-to-be-identified woman pushing a man in front of a train on a platform at Southbank station this morning. No further details have been released at this stage, but the attack appears to be random. We will have more for you later in the day. Police have warned there will be substantial delays for morning commuters on all trains passing through Southbank station.

One Month Earlier

ONE

CORMAC IS DOING that thing again. *He* is the one asking the questions, not me. It's not entirely uncommon as a defence mechanism. If I'm asking the questions, I'm in control of the exchange and some people don't like that. Type A personalities need control as they fear being manipulated. When cornered, they might ask their own questions to pry control back. But it's not so simple with Cormac; he's not that kind of man. He's asking me questions because he's curious; he wants to get to know me before he can trust me. Despite the clinical setting, and the fact he's a client, trust is at the core of the relationship, trust is the silent contract we form. But I don't like the questions. I don't like giving up too much of myself.

'So you moved out here as a kid then?' he says in his breezy Irish lilt.

'Yes,' I say. 'When I was six, we moved to the city for my dad's work and I've been here ever since.'

'What did your dad do, then?'

'He was a professor.'

'They didn't need professors where you'd come from?' I keep his gaze. I show I'm still in control, even if he's asking me the questions.

‘Well, they did, but he got a head of department role down here at a university.’

‘Those bastards,’ he says, with a grin. ‘Nothing against your old man, but it was a head of department that booted me.’

It’s healthy that he can laugh about it. Most young men would respond with more anger. ‘Do you blame the head of department for what happened?’

‘No, not him. I blame myself. I did it, no one else. I could have done something different to earn a little money.’

‘The papers you wrote all earned As.’

‘They did, you’ve done your homework.’ Not homework: it was in the email from Adam Limbargo, the man who referred him on. I met Adam at university over twenty years ago, and he’s still there lecturing in Anthropology. I’ve always felt like I’ve owed him a favour. He was a year or two older, but he always looked after me, when most older guys were more likely to try getting me into bed. There was a boozy night, I was stuck in the city and had lost my purse at a bar. Despite being in a drunken state himself, Adam put me in a taxi with enough cash for the fare.

Last time we met it was at a cafe over coffee. What I thought was an old friend hoping to catch up, I quickly realised, was a counselling session for him. You would be surprised how often it happens: I hear from someone out of the blue, wanting me to dispense free advice. He bought me a coffee, then told me about his problem. After that I didn’t hear from him for months until he sent me this email.

Hello Margot,

It’s been a while. I caught your guest lecture in April. I was at the back of the theatre and didn’t have time to say hello but I did love your take on *Evil as a Necessary Ideal*. It is fascinating to think about the origin of the concept of evil, how it is really just a label for treatable behaviour that falls within the spectrum of Antisocial

TELL ME LIES

Personality Disorder: sociopathy, psychopathy etc. But I'm not just writing to gush about your genius, Margot.

I'm sorry for the circumstances when we last caught up: I was in a dark place. Now I'm contacting you again because I have another favour to ask. I have a student who has been expelled from university. His name is Cormac Gibbons and to say he is remarkable is an understatement. Long story short, I believe Cormac could have an extraordinary career as a psychologist. The trouble is, he decided that it would be wise to write sixteen papers for other students in various courses – I should add they all earned A or A+ marks but that is beside the point. Most of the students have been punished in one way or another but the university had no choice but to move Cormac on. I don't understand people the way you do, Margot, but I know that Cormac was smart enough to comprehend the risks and consequences of his actions for a relatively small reward, and yet he still did it. He must have known he would get caught. This begs the question why would a student on a full scholarship risk his education for such a modest amount of money? It's risk-seeking behaviour at the least – it's almost as though he wanted us to throw him out. I'll leave it up to you, being the professional.

Cormac has agreed to see you and I'll be paying his fees if you can find time for the boy.

Can you help?

All the best,

Adam

I continue the session. 'And how did you get caught?'

'Someone came to me, I guess she knew what I was doing. She paid me for an essay and when I wrote it she took it to the head of department. *Entrapment*, you could call it.'

'So you blame her?'

'No,' he says.

His eyes move about the room. The vintage red cedar wardrobe I found in a store in Brisbane. The scrolled desk, tidy now but this

morning it was cluttered with notes and bills. The small lockable filing cabinet where I keep recent notes from patients. And then his eyes settle on the painting on my wall. It's boring, but they're supposed to be boring. A landscape, rural Victoria, a dark barn in the distance. He turns back to me when I begin to speak again.

'Well, who do you blame then?'

'Why are you asking? Am I supposed to admit that I blame myself? You want me to accept responsibility. I told you, I do blame myself.'

'But do you really believe it or are you just telling me that?'

His eyes find the window now and fix there. 'Of course, I do.'

He smiles and it's clear he's used to the power of that smile, a Hollywood smile – strong jaw, generous lips, eyes a deep green – he knows what it can do, the doors it can open. But it doesn't work here.

I let my pen hover over the page of my pad. 'You blame yourself for what? The situation you and your sister are in or for losing your scholarship?'

'They'll take me back,' he says. 'That's why I'm here, that's why they organised our little meetings. That's why I'm looking into those pretty brown eyes.'

I keep a neutral expression, brush the compliment aside. 'We're talking about you today, Cormac, not me.'

'Of course. You get it all the time though, I'm sure.'

I push on. 'You were talking about your scholarship and the position you and your sister are in.'

'I was,' he continues. 'So I blame myself for the stuff with the university. But not for the position we are in. I know why we are here in Australia. I know why we're not back in Dublin, why I'm flat broke with no hope of making anything of myself.'

'And why is that?'

'My father.'

Like that, a breakthrough. A suspended breakthrough – this needs unpacking – but it’s progress. I need to keep him talking.

‘Tell me about him.’

‘What do you want to know?’

‘I want to know why you blame him for your current economic struggles.’

‘*Economic struggles?*’ he says, bemused. ‘You ever worked in a kitchen?’

‘No,’ I say truthfully.

‘Who do you think is the lowest of the low in a kitchen? One guess.’

‘Who is it?’

‘It’s the *kitchen hand*, which is a fancy way of saying the guy that does the dishes.’

I eye the clock above the door. We have ten minutes left. ‘Was that you, Cormac?’

‘I scrubbed pots for seven hours. Chefs are all overworked, miserable pricks. They used to say stuff like “I need a clean pan stat” as if they were a doctor performing surgery and not just cooking someone else’s steak. I could work forty hours scrubbing pans or write one essay and make more money.’ This has to be an exaggeration; it didn’t sound as if he was making *that* much money from the essays. I’m still sticking with the self-sabotage theory.

‘So, let’s take a step back. Why do you blame your father?’

‘You know what my father did? You done your research?’

‘No,’ I say. ‘I don’t do research, Cormac, I let clients tell me. So I’m asking you, why *do* you blame him?’

‘Now you’re going Freudian on me, aren’t ya?’ Again that smile, his eyes half-closed. He cups his jaw, then slides his fore finger and thumb down over his stubble, pinching his chin. ‘You’re thinking I was competitive with him, somehow? I despise my father because I wanted to fuck my mum, right?’

I don't react, keeping a perfectly composed veneer. This is amateur stuff: an oedipal complex. He's mocking the practice now. It's juvenile but is he doing it to distract me? Or does he actually want to talk more about his parents' relationship. 'No, Cormac. That's an outdated idea. I'm sure your professors told you that. What we are doing now, what I am doing with you, is trying to understand who you are, your background, so we can make a plan moving forward.'

'A plan for what?'

'A plan for treatment. You said you wanted to go back to university. The only way they will take you back is if we can help you work through your issues.'

'Okay,' he says. 'You're right.'

'You want to be a psychologist, correct?'

'I like to learn about psychology. I don't know what I want to *be*.'

I scratch a note in my pad. *Interested in academic psychology.*
'Well, you will have to learn about yourself first.'

I glance up at the clock. Three minutes. I let the silence linger. Silence compels clients to fill it; stay silent enough and you tend to get honesty.

'So, tell me about your father.'

'You really want to know why I blame him?'

'I do,' I say, turning a page of my pad.

He gives a small tired laugh. 'My father fell in love with the wrong woman.'

'What do you mean?'

'He fell in love with someone other than my mother and did something very bad.'

'What did he do, Cormac?'

He levels me with his gaze as if he's grown tired of the conversation. 'He took a knife and stabbed my auntie and my grandfather, and he tried to stab my mother, too. Mum survived but the others

didn't.' My pen stops dead. My eyes flick up. He's looking at the window again, his nose is creased in a faint scowl. 'So you can write that down in your pad. Go on: *that* is why I blame my father. He is the reason we got as far away as we possibly could. He's the reason we're in Melbourne and not Dublin.'

Trauma, I think. Of course it is, of course that's why he doesn't feel he is good enough to be happy, to have a scholarship, or to maintain a healthy support network. *Trauma*. He probably blames himself in some way for the break-up of the marriage and his father's reaction. 'I'm sorry to hear that, Cormac.' He hides behind his humour, he tries to use flattery as a distraction, he doesn't trust men in positions of authority – it's beginning to make sense. He loved his mother, was raised by her, protected by her. 'And your mother?' I'm almost afraid to ask.

'She never really recovered. I don't know where she is now. She left us about a year ago. She would go out for days, and I'd come home and find her with a needle in her arm. She never adjusted after what happened to her sister and her dad.'

It's a bad time to stop but my next client will already be in the lobby. 'Okay, Cormac. We've come to the end of our time. I've got you again on Thursday. I want to continue this conversation then.'

'This coming Thursday?' he asks, rising. I stand too.

'Is that okay?'

'What time?'

'Ten o'clock.'

'Oh jeez, I've got some very important business to take care of at ten.' He smiles, to let me know he's joking. 'I'll be there.' He gently bumps my arm with his fist. The contact is too familiar, it's not professional, but I'm not going to admonish him after what he's just told me.

I look up into his green eyes. 'Don't be late,' I say. 'Oh, and Cormac, take ten minutes a day to write down anything you're

thinking or feeling, especially when you feel any extreme emotion: anger, rage, ecstasy, elation. Just note it and write about it. Can you do that?’

‘Alright, sure. Doctor’s orders. Write my feelings down. Got it. See you Thursday at three.’

Before bringing in my next client, I go to Anna at reception, lean down and quietly ask, ‘Has payment come through for Cormac?’

She clicks the screen. ‘Yep, all paid up for the next few sessions.’

‘Great. Give me two minutes, then you can send my next client through.’

I make a few more notes about Cormac’s parents. I’m curious, so I quickly unlock my phone and search for the story. I find something. *Dublin double homicide, man in custody*. It’s from years ago. But he’s alive. Cormac’s father is alive, or at least he was when he was arrested. He wasn’t shot by the police and he didn’t turn the knife on himself. *He fell in love with the wrong woman*. There is clearly a lot of trauma in his past, and in his family. Complex emotions he’s suppressing and internalising, no doubt. Potentially self-blame too.

Now he is under an intense level of stress to raise his sister, to provide for her in a foreign place. He could justify the essay writing for others as a means to an end. I make one last note: *Father still alive in prison? Self-sabotaging or simply reckless?*

•

I get through my afternoon appointments, then set off for home. I park in our driveway, listening, waiting for the song to finish. *In Bloom* by Nirvana. I close my eyes for a few moments.

When I get inside, Gabe is hunched over a pan. I kiss him on the cheek. There’s a bouquet of flowers on the table. *That’s* a surprise.

‘Flowers?’ I say, taking them up, smelling them.

‘Not from me,’ he says, turning away from the pan, his lips twisted in an awkward smile. ‘They’ve just come an hour ago.’

I take the card and turn it over in my hand. *Thanks for today, see you soon, Hudson x.*

‘July,’ I call into the cavernous house. ‘July!’

‘What?’ her voice comes from upstairs, I look up and see her hanging over the banister, her hair falling around her face in dark curls.

‘Come down here.’

She grunts. ‘I’m busy.’

‘Studying or talking to Hudson?’

‘Studying.’

‘Get down here now, July.’

It took her months to recover from her last break-up, her grades dropped, she was desolate. Now she’s moved on, which I’m grateful for, but she seems to be even keener on this Hudson than the last boy.

‘In the kitchen,’ I say.

She comes through. ‘What is it?’

‘What did you do today?’

She looks guilty. I turn to Gabe, who shrugs.

‘Were you at school?’

‘Yes,’ she says, dragging the word out, exaggerating. Then she notices the flowers on the kitchen bench.

‘So if I call the school, they’ll say you were there?’

‘Oh my God, Mum, it’s study leave. I don’t have to be at the school all day.’

‘So where were you?’

She looks to her father for help, as if Gabe is going to save her. Then she turns back to me. ‘I was at the library in the city, okay?’

‘Who were you with?’

Her cheeks are glowing now. ‘I’m seventeen, Mum. I can hang out with whoever I like.’

‘Were you with Hudson?’

She doesn't need to answer, I can see it in her face. 'Why didn't you tell us?'

'Because I didn't want you to make me go to school. No one else goes to school on study leave. We can study wherever.'

'That's beside the point,' Gabe contributes. 'We need to know where you are. You can't take off into the city on a whim. And how much study are you getting done with Hudson?'

'A lot, actually.'

'But he's finished school.'

'So?' she says. 'He's still studying.'

Studying law of all things. He went to school at Melbourne Grammar, Dad's a QC and now he's sending my daughter flowers. I laughed when July had told me, 'He's mature, Mum.' I asked what makes him mature. Her response: '*I don't know, he's focused on uni, and like he doesn't send selfies.*'

I grab the flowers, thrust them towards her. 'Here,' I say. 'Make sure you tell us next time.'

She smiles. I know that smile. It used to be the way she smiled for her father. She wouldn't dare smell them in front of us, but I can see she's tempted. 'Okay,' she says. 'Can I hang with him again tomorrow, then?'

I turn to Gabe, who simply shrugs. 'Hey, at least she's asking this time.'

We'll talk about this later, I think. 'Home by four,' I say, hating the fact I can't control my own daughter. 'Make sure you are actually studying, and keep your phone on.'

Prosecutor: ‘Would the witness please read the document Exhibit A aloud?’

Simms: ‘Ah sure, okay. Documentary evidence – Exhibit A: Personal diary extract

‘She says I don’t need to write about anything in particular, just to think about how I’ve been feeling lately and make a note of it. This week I was feeling a little down, but seeing Margot helped. It was probably the highlight actually, as sad as it sounds. She made me consider my history and how it affects me.

She tells me I’m clever, and tells me that when I’m better, when I am on top of things, I will be happy. When you think about my life and everything I’ve been through, it’s impossible to believe my luck will change and everything will be fine. The past follows like a shadow, it stretches, growing longer and longer and darker and darker.

When she asks me if I blame anyone, I can’t help but blame myself. It’s always been my fault. If I answer honestly, if I really consider why I did what I did, the only answer is I am who I am. I’m made of all of my decisions and all the things that have happened to me. But now I have her. Now I have a reason to try harder.

The way she smiles at me, the way she tilts her head, her dark eyes fixed on me – I can’t remember the last time someone made me feel so good about myself. But then she also challenges me too. I wonder if she knows that when she told me to write about my feelings I would end up writing about her.

What else is happening? Well, I feel like I can start working again soon, hopefully. I’ve not had to do work for

a while, and I wonder if I'll be able to sustain it. I applied for a few jobs and now I'm just waiting to hear back . . .

Simms: 'And the rest is indecipherable.'

Prosecutor: 'Thank you.'