THE WAY IT IS NOW

GARRY DISHER

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ON A MONDAY in January, three weeks into the new century, Charlie Deravin drove down to retrieve his surfboards. He was intending a quick in-and-out, but stopped when he saw the For Sale sign in the parched front lawn where Bass Street intersected with Tidepool. He found himself idling in the middle of the road with a strange ache in his chest. It was true. No longer an abstract notion. The sign was hand-painted, as if his old man hoped no one would take it seriously, but the offer was there for all to see.

Everything tilted for Charlie. Lost or changed

definition. He had never noticed the rusted gutters; the rotting window frames and florets of roof lichen. Not a house, no longer a home, barely a beach shack. His mother's potted geraniums absent from the veranda. And his father, watching motionless in a deckchair, also altered.

Charlie pulled his Subaru into the driveway. Got out, stretched the kinks in his spine. He could hear the sea down there where Tidepool dead-ended at the path that wound through the tea-trees and onto the sand. Smell the sea. Gulls calling. Complicated emotions calling.

He edged along the flank of his father's Holden, his T-shirt catching on the untamed driveway bushes, and stumbled into plain view.

'Dad.'

'Son.'

'Thought you'd be at work,' Charlie said.

Detective Sergeant Rhys Deravin, looking at Charlie, was shadowed by the veranda roof, by impending divorce, and by a deeply ingrained disappointment that he was being expected to swallow another lie, this time uttered by his son.

Okay, thought Charlie. He crossed the lawn, briefly blinded by a patch of sunlight, and settled into a deckchair across from his father. A mug of tea steamed on the lid of the dented army footlocker that stood between them, the repository of the family's sandshoes, flippers, thongs.

'Good drive down?'

Charlie heard the other questions: you chose a Monday

morning, hoping I'd be at work? You're dropping in on your mother, too? Did Liam come with you? And so on.

'Not bad.'

His father, alerted by a car rattling along Bass Street, raising a tiny swirl of dust, reached absently for his tea. Sipped, resettled the mug on the footlocker again and crossed his legs—thin, tanned, sinewy, beachcomber's legs; cyclist's legs in ragged shorts. Energy was always coiled in Rhys Deravin, until it uncoiled. Physical energy; mental. Renowned as a thief catcher; not so much a husband and father. Good-looking still, in his late forties.

He stood, flipping tea onto the lawn. 'I'll leave you to it.'

'Dad—'

'Didn't bring a trailer?'

'It's just the boards. I'll be fine with the roof racks.'

His father said, a little helplessly, 'Your bed? Your wardrobe?'

Charlie tensed. 'Salvos, I thought.'

It was almost a tipping point. His father flexed and gathered himself and said, 'Well, you sort that out, I'm not doing it.'

He banged through the screen door, and immediately out again. 'I need you to move your car.'

'Will do.'

In the time it took Charlie to reverse and park where he wouldn't obstruct traffic—what there was of it in Menlo Beach—his father, now wearing trousers, polished shoes,

a short-sleeved shirt and a tie, was stowing a briefcase and nodding goodbye from behind the wheel of his car. Charlie nodded back. Felt the tension ease a little.

He wondered if a life—or lives—could be boiled down to a house.

His surfboards were stored on a rack in the garden shed but he opened the front door and stepped inside the house, needing to shake the sense of coming untethered from his childhood. Straight into the sitting room, a broad space with a kitchen at one end leading to a dogleg corridor and the rooms beyond: his bedroom, Liam's, his parents'; a bathroom and laundry near the back door. All pokey.

He felt rattled to see the sitting room so underpopulated, just two mismatched op-shop armchairs on either side of the coffee table, which his mother clearly hadn't wanted. Books leaning sparsely on the shelves against the back wall: encyclopaedias, Tom Clancy, sailing manuals, cricket and surfing biographies. Charlie's mother hadn't wanted those, either. A card table where the dining room table once sat, with a straight-back chair pulled up to a bowl of mostly consumed cornflakes and the dregs of orange juice in a glass.

Charlie rinsed bowl and glass at the kitchen sink as if to cling to a solid present. The way it is now, he thought. Gaps had opened in all their lives and the repairs were makeshift. No wonder his father rarely stayed down here these days, preferring to fill his time with work and his

Prahran floozy. That was Liam's word, floozy: going for alliteration. Charlie quite liked Fay. She hadn't tried to impress him—she simply regarded him as her bloke's son.

What did she think of 5 Tidepool Street? Had she ever been here? Charlie walked through to the master bedroom, then to the bathroom, looking for evidence that she stayed sometimes. He didn't find anything. Maybe she'd never been here. Maybe she didn't want to sleep with Rhys Deravin on a mattress full of history.

Charlie poked his head into Liam's room: nothing remained but four Blu Tack smudges on one wall. Finally, his own room—the smallest, as the younger son. He'd call the Salvation Army to collect his bed frame, mattress, wardrobe and bedside table, but he'd forgotten all about his tennis trophies and his Class of 1999 graduation photo, the police commissioner shaking his hand in the grounds of the academy. He took them down from the shelf, stacked them in the car and returned to check the wardrobe, the drawers, expecting maybe an old concert ticket or a five-cent coin.

Zilch.

The landline rang before he could lock up and collect the surfboards. He thought: Jess, Dad, a colleague of Dad's, Liam or Mum. The phone, a pale green relic of the seventies, was on the kitchen bench next to a basket of bills, receipts, envelopes, keys and a tube of sunblock.

'Rhys Deravin's phone, Charlie speaking.'

'It's me.'

‘Hi, sweetheart.’

‘Sad?’

‘A bit.’ Charlie paused: she deserved more. ‘A bit unreal.’

‘Memories?’

‘Memories and absences,’ Charlie said, and stopped.

His wife waited a moment. Laughed and said lightly, ‘That Charlie; can’t shut him up sometimes.’

Two years in, it was sometimes like that between them. Often like that. The rebukes fond rather than harsh, though. So far.

‘The place looks a bit forlorn,’ Charlie said.

‘My lovely, I wish I could be there. Em says hello. Say hello to Daddy.’

Charlie saw his daughter in his wife’s arms and heard some of her soft, gassy pops and murmurs, and, when he said, ‘Hello, bubba,’ silence. Maybe she’d recognised his voice and was wondering what he was doing in the handpiece. It tickled him to think that.

Then Jess was saying something about a stinky nappy, and they said goodbye and Charlie, pulled against himself by the then and now of his life, wanted some fresh air.

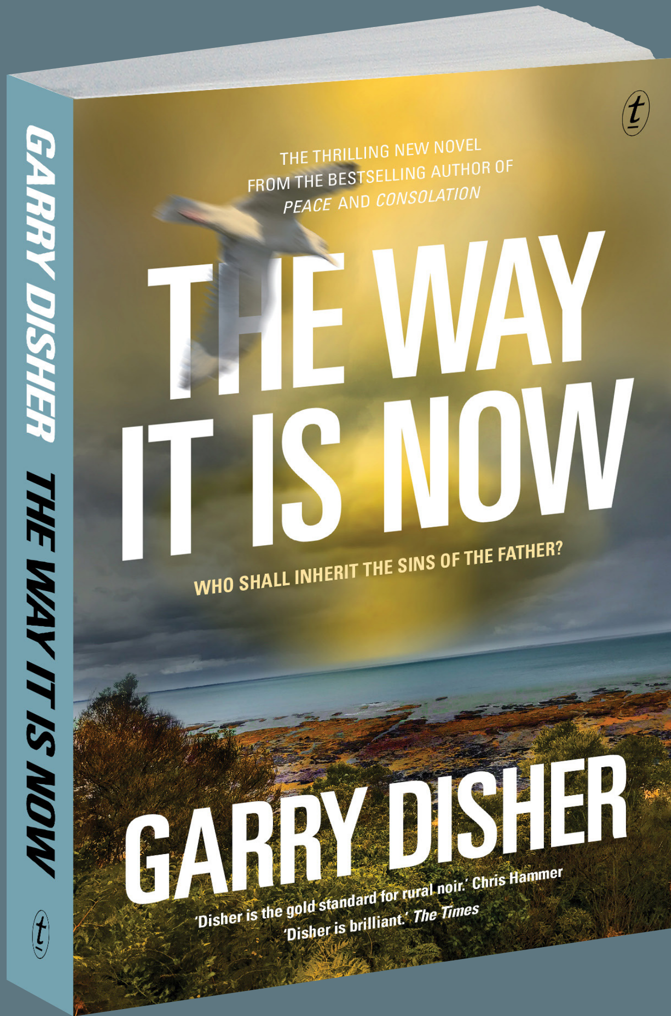
On the way out an opened envelope caught his eye, ‘Asbestos Audit’ scrawled across it in his father’s impatient hand.

The report was five pages of headings and crammed type, confirming that the fibro-cement wall sheets of 5 Tidepool Street contained asbestos. Well, they knew that.

Menlo Beach was a Peninsula beach town of unassuming shacks dating from the 1930s, side by side on a crosshatch of narrow, potholed dirt streets. Half the houses down here on the flat were fibro. Cheap housing, back when Dad and his mates started buying holiday houses and weekend getaways in the late 1970s, places that became family homes. Six cops on ten little streets. Rowdy, rampaging men who thrilled the kids and made them laugh; one or two wives, cut desperately from the same hardwood, who didn't. Booze-soaked barbecues and beach cricket, wrestling on the lawn. Sailing, catching waves, cycling up and down Arthurs Seat. Exhilarating guys who called you chicken and wore you out. Guys with big natures and a black intensity if you caught them unguarded. A fellowship pretty much disbanded now. The wives had left first, when the kids were young. Charlie's mother had been the last and she'd waited until her sons were grown—or until her husband had taken up with a floozy.

Charlie slid the report back into the envelope. It would have been his mother's idea: do the right thing, alert potential buyers. Avoid a lawsuit down the track, some home handyman drilling into the fibro and sucking in a lungful of asbestos. The well-heeled professionals were moving in on the flatland houses, now that all the adjacent clifftop blocks had fallen to suburban castles that strained for a glimpse of sea between the pines. People like that would snap up this shack, Charlie's childhood home. Tear it down, erect some cubic glass-and-timber wet dream.

Feeling distracted and out of sorts, sensing that some showy disaster was coming, Charlie locked up the house and fetched his surfboards from the garden shed. Strapped them to the roof rack while the benign sun worked powerfully on him; the brine and the tidal wash sounding upon the sand. He'd intended to drive to his mother's house in Swanage, five minutes by car. But hell, the day wasn't hot, wasn't windy: why not walk there across the familiar geography of past summers? Take him less than an hour.



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