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For Barry and Frances Mottram

KILLARNEY

NIKKI MOTTRAM



UQP

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Johnny Buckley hurries down the steps of the Killarney Hotel, oblivious to the scent of wattle and rain in the air. He skids on the wet pavement, and with a flash of teeth beneath his moustache, strides down the footpath. His mother complains that he walks too fast – always in a hurry – but he’s spent the evening with his mates and now it’s time to go. If he didn’t have Friday nights to blow off steam, he doesn’t know what he’d do. He could be a bloody robot for all his job requires. Cut. Saw. Push the wood along the conveyor belt. But for the moment, with the alcohol in his veins, he is free.

He’s been working overtime at the sawmill as he needs the money for his daughter – for the scooter he’s bought for her fifth birthday. He pictures her face light up when she sees the purple streamers for the first time, the grin blossoming on her shy, gentle face. His little girl’s been through a lot this past year, what with their separation, and her mum’s new boyfriend. Amber’s never been very good at being on her own, but he has to admit, he wasn’t expecting to be replaced this soon, and he’s not sure he likes the feeling.

He leans against a telegraph pole, contemplating this, then with a jolt remembers where he is, what he's doing. He steps out onto the road, a desperate need to get home and sleep off the hangover which is sure to follow.

George and Frank, friends since primary school, sit on the porch outside George's house, his kelpie at their feet. Dire Straits plays on the stereo and beads of condensation drip down their beer bottles in the humid evening. A motorbike speeds up along their street – seventy, eighty, ninety kilometres per hour. The two men look at each other. Here we go again. The rider's been putting on a show at the same time every night for the past week. They have no idea who it is – which is strange for a town the size of Killarney.

They don't see the bike as much as they hear it. And later when they're asked, they will say it sounded like a high-pitched scream, getting louder and louder. Until it wasn't. They will recall metal scraping bitumen. Orange sparks against a black sky. The dull thud of impact.

They leave their drinks and run. A man lies crumpled on the road, a halo of blood beneath his head. The smell of burnt smoke stings Frank's nostrils as he leans over to see if the guy's breathing, and that's when he realises it's Johnny Buckley from down the street. George sprints back to the house to call triple zero.

A hundred metres away the motorbike has stopped sliding. The rider, in a helmet and black leathers, stands up in a daze, then retrieves the motorbike and limps away into the shadows.

On a verandah in a cottage in the next block, a scooter is propped against the balustrade, its ribbons flying in the breeze.

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Dana sank into the leather Chesterfield that had become like a well-worn pair of shoes and nibbled on leftover Christmas cake. She stared at the empty grate of the fireplace. The house was silent in the early January afternoon, save for the low rumble of a plane overhead, and she began to wonder when Angus would drop by. For the first few weeks of the school holidays she'd been taking him to the library and they'd been having lunch together. Now that she was back from Sydney and her bags had been put away, the house felt empty without him.

She was about to put a CD on when the doorbell rang. Her neighbour, Susan, stood before her, fiddling with the ceramic stone of her necklace. She was trialling a new hair style and wisps of hair had escaped from the combs pinned to the side of her head.

'Hi,' said Dana with a rush of goodwill. 'Where's Angus? I thought he'd have stuck his head in by now.'

A flicker of pain darted across Susan's eyes. She stood

awkwardly on the front step, her collarbones sharp in the vee of her blouse. ‘That’s what I’ve come to talk to you about – he’s still with Tina.’

‘Why don’t you come in?’ suggested Dana, ushering Susan down the hallway to the kitchen. ‘I’ll make us some tea.’

Dana switched on the kettle and retrieved the good set of china from the lounge room cabinet. She set two cups with painted butterflies on matching saucers, the aroma of spice filling the air as she steeped the tea in boiling water.

‘Let’s take these out to the verandah,’ she said, handing a cup to Susan, sensing that whatever she’d come to say would be easier sitting side by side looking out over the garden and the park across the road. The cane chair creaked as she eased into it. She blew on her tea as she waited for Susan to speak.

‘How was your Christmas Day?’ asked Susan.

‘It was nice. I spent the day with Mum and we relaxed and watched *It’s a Wonderful Life*. Then we had a glazed ham for lunch.’

Susan looked at her pointedly. ‘Did you end up talking to Hugh?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘And how did it go?’

‘Ahh, look, we’ve decided to leave things as they were ... in that we’re still separated.’ She sipped her tea. ‘I used to hear the statistics, that after the death of a child your marriage has only a five per cent chance of survival, but I never thought it would apply to us.’ She paused, watching the hydrangeas sway in the breeze. ‘My counsellor agrees that ultimately it’s been hard to heal myself within the confines of our relationship.’

‘It sounds like seeing her has really helped you clarify things.’

‘It has. And how about you? How was Christmas here?’

‘Jason came out for the day. He’s lined up a new mining job in Saudi and flew out a few days later. It’s the opportunity of a lifetime – I’ve never seen him so happy. Angus was pleased to see his uncle, but I’m going to miss him.’

‘And what about Tina?’

‘She called saying she had a Christmas present for Angus and begged to see him, so she finally showed up with an enormous soft gorilla from god knows where and handed it to him like it was the best thing since sliced bread.’ Susan shook her head. ‘And against my better judgement, I said she could take him back home with her for a week or two. She’s off the drugs and her AA counsellor in Warwick gave me his word about that, so in the end her sobriety was the reason I said yes.’ She glanced at her watch, her forehead creased. ‘They were supposed to be back this morning.’

‘I’m sure they won’t be too much longer,’ Dana said, suddenly feeling jittery and wishing she’d added honey to her tea. ‘How did Tina seem when you saw her?’ she asked tentatively. ‘Was she looking healthy?’

‘Well, I’ve always hated all that get-up she wears, short skirts and ripped jeans, like she’s thirty-seven going on sixteen, but she has some meat on her bones, so that’s a step in the right direction.’

‘And what about Angus?’

‘He lights up when he sees her. It’s like the millions of times she’s disappointed him just never happened.’ She paused. ‘I’m just worried. He’s finally settled down, he’s got an academic scholarship to Grammar next year, and he’s even started playing tennis. I don’t want to risk her blowing it all up again.’ A muscle clenched in her jaw. ‘You should have seen his face when he saw her again. He was so happy.’

Dana leant back in her chair. ‘And has Tina told you what her plans are? Is she still living out near ... Warwick, is it?’

‘She’s working at the corner store out at Queen Mary Falls. Angus says they’ve been letting him help out too. But aside from that, no. And there’s a part of me that doesn’t want to know.’

A neighbour with a pram waved up at them as she strolled along the street.

‘I often wonder,’ Susan continued, ‘if she inherited her father’s schizophrenia genes. She was always one of those kids who got herself into scrapes. Honestly, if there were five kids sitting in a tree, she’d be the one who’d fall out. Or, if there was a group of them running in the bush, she’d be the one who’d get bitten by a snake. I know that she loves Angus with all her heart, and I really want her to start doing better – and I feel terrible for saying it – but after all the overdoses I’m just not sure I trust her.’ Her cup began to clatter as she returned it to the saucer.

‘Are you okay?’ Dana asked gently.

‘I’m fine.’

Dana recognised Susan’s fierce independence in her terse response.

‘Sorry to burden you with my worries. I should be heading back and getting dinner on.’ She took a final sip of tea and placed the cup on the cane table beside her.

As Dana walked Susan down the path she bent over to pull a tuft of grass from the base of the lavender bush in the garden bed. ‘With all the rain we’ve had, the weeds are growing back overnight,’ she observed.

Susan followed Dana’s lead and reached down to pull a weed. She straightened up and threw it onto the lawn. ‘Strange weather we’ve had lately. So much rain and then the odd freezing day. It

got down to nine degrees here on Christmas day.’ As Susan bent over to pull another weed her legs buckled and she doubled over, collapsing into the bush.

‘What’s wrong?’ Dana asked, her heart beating faster as she reached down to her friend.

Susan’s face was white as she took Dana’s arm and allowed herself to be pulled up to rest on the brick fence.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Should I call an ambulance?’ Dana was alarmed. Susan was usually so robust.

‘No, just a bit dizzy,’ Susan insisted, but Dana wasn’t convinced. She hurried next door and grabbed Susan’s car keys, kicking herself that she hadn’t bothered to replace her Mercedes after crashing it the year before. She’d reasoned there was no point having a car of her own given her proximity to the office, but now she regretted it.

After helping Susan into the passenger seat, she drove at breakneck speed through town and skidded into a loading zone outside the Emergency Department of the Toowoomba Base Hospital. Five ambulances were moored against the kerb as she hastened around the side of the car to help Susan, who was still looking pale and withdrawn.

Inside, the reception area was packed. As they stood in line waiting to be triaged Susan clutched her stomach and stared at the pale linoleum of the floor, clearly in pain. Dana felt the stares of other patients as they progressed towards the reception desk. A man in thongs and a hoodie crouched against the wall, a red-cheeked toddler slumped against his mother’s chest. Dana had a vision of her holding her own baby son, Oscar, who’d been eight months old when he died. She did her best to banish the image of him from her mind and focus on Susan.

A large television was anchored on the wall opposite. As they inched forward in the queue, they watched in silence as the news bulletin came on.

A man has been seriously injured in a hit-and-run involving a motorcycle last night, in the small Queensland town of Killarney. Witnesses said the thirty-two-year-old man was knocked unconscious, sustaining serious head wounds on Arbutus Street after the bike collided with him. He was taken to Warwick Hospital and is in a critical condition. Police have appealed for any witnesses to come forward.

‘God, how awful,’ said Susan, a sheen of sweat glistening on her brow. ‘Maybe you should move the car?’

Dana shook her head. ‘I’ll wait until we’ve seen a doctor and sort it out afterwards. We’re almost there.’

When the receptionist finally waved them forward and asked a brief series of questions they were ushered into a small cubicle. Susan lay on a bed while a nurse took her pulse and palpated her stomach. There was a thinness to Susan’s face that Dana hadn’t noticed before and she had a flashback to Susan saying how exhausted she’d been before Christmas. When Susan mumbled something to the nurse about having a colonoscopy a few days earlier, Dana stood up. ‘I’d better go and move the car.’

‘Maybe you could duck home and leave a note on the door for Tina and Angus?’ Susan suggested. ‘She doesn’t have a mobile, and I’m worried they’re going to get home and have no idea where I am.’

Dana made her way back through multiple heavy doors until she was standing outside under an ominous sky. At Susan’s house, she taped a note to the door letting Tina and Angus know they

were at the hospital. By the time she'd returned, parked on a side street and managed to speak to someone in Emergency, an hour had passed. Susan was lying sedated in the same room in which Dana had left her.

'What did I miss?' Dana asked, taking a seat.

'Oh, nothing much. They're just waiting on the results of some tests. Apparently I should know later on at some point.'

Dana spent the next two hours listening to beeping machines and the chatter of medical staff on the other side of a curtain as Susan dozed. She slumped in her chair, her head against the wall, wishing she'd brought a book. She was just about to get up and try to find a magazine to read when a woman burst into the room, her white face blazing in the stark fluorescent light. The woman, who could only have been Susan's daughter, Tina, rushed to her mother's side, Angus on her heels.

'God, Mum, you scared the shit out of us,' the woman said, collapsing dramatically into the vacant chair beside her mother.

Angus gave Dana a hug and she wrapped her arms around him and pulled him close. Despite the fact that he was now twelve and his white-blond hair had darkened over the summer, he looked pale and anxious. As Susan introduced them, Tina picked at the long sleeves of her turtleneck bodysuit and adjusted her harem pants, avoiding meeting Dana's eyes.

'What happened?' Tina asked, reaching for her mother's hand.

Susan winced. 'Nothing to panic about. I just had a bit of a fall. They're running some tests, but I'm sure it will end up being nothing.' She gestured for Angus to give her a kiss.

'Mum, I've told you before, if you keep working like a maniac, you're gonna die of a heart attack'

'As I said, Tina, it's probably nothing, just a stomach bug.'

They're running some tests and I should know in the next day or two.'

'Anyway, Mum, you need to slow down.' Tina stretched her arms in the air and let out a loud yawn. 'So do I, I'm so freaking tired today.'

'Why are *you* so tired?' Susan replied irritably. 'I would have thought you'd be well rested after the Christmas break.'

'Paid employment is hard, man. I've got to be at work by nine and they glare at me every time I go out for a smoke.' She winked at Angus. 'It's not all bad though. There's some hot guys, they've got this, like, rad hippy vibe with dreddies and flannelette shirts.'

Susan's mouth was a thin line. 'You know how much it pains me to see you working in that shop, when you could have done anything. If I had your brains, I would have done something really worthwhile, like finance or law.'

Tina nodded emphatically. 'Great, Mum, maybe you should do law. They're accepting mature age students now, so you can totally sign up. It's never too late to live out your wildest dreams.' She cackled loudly at her own joke.

'Honestly, Tina, the only thing I've ever wanted is for you to be happy.'

'That's bullshit, Mum.' The volume in Tina's voice began to rise. 'The only thing you've ever wanted is for me to be less embarrassing. You just wish you had a daughter you could show off to the CWA ladies, so you don't have to lie and change the subject every time someone asks how I'm doing. Remember that time you told Rosemary I'd gone on a six-week trip to Europe while I was in rehab? When I bumped into her at Kmart and she asked about my trip and I was like, "Fuck off, Rosemary, I wouldn't go to Europe if you paid me."' "

‘Okay, Tina, that’s enough.’

‘Mum,’ Angus interrupted, giving his nan’s hand a squeeze. ‘Do you mind if we go to the canteen and get some chips? I’m starving.’

‘Sure, baby,’ Tina cooed and ruffled his hair, ‘Just let me get my purse.’ She groped around in her pockets, then grimaced. ‘Hey, Mum, I don’t suppose you have five bucks you could lend me?’

‘Yes, Tina,’ Susan said through gritted teeth. ‘My handbag’s on the table.’

As Tina stood up the curtain swung open and a nurse stuck her head in. ‘I need you to keep it down in here,’ she said with a look of annoyance. ‘The patient needs her rest and if you can’t be quiet, I’ll have to ask you to leave.’

‘We were just going.’ Tina rolled her eyes. She retrieved a ten-dollar note from Susan’s handbag and waved it in the air. She hesitated before giving her mother a peck on the cheek. ‘I’m going to hang out with Liz tonight, then head back to Killarney in time for my shift tomorrow morning. I hope your stomach ache, or whatever, gets better.’

‘I’ll be fine, darling.’

‘Nan, do you mind if I go with Mum? Edith at the cafe said that I could have another few days of work if I wanted.’

‘That’s fine, sweetheart.’ Susan gave Angus a hug and stroked his cheek. ‘Be good for your mum, please. I’ll give you a call tomorrow night and let you know how I’m getting on.’

As they disappeared behind the curtain divider, a doctor in navy blue scrubs swept into the room. She stood at the end of Susan’s bed, a chart in her hand.

‘So, how are you feeling this evening, Susan?’ Her brown eyes were earnest beneath tortoiseshell glasses.

Susan attempted to straighten up against the pillow. ‘In all honesty, I’ve felt better.’

‘Would it be okay if I sat on the bed?’

Susan nodded.

‘So your results have come back.’ The doctor flicked a glance at Dana. ‘Do you need some privacy or are you happy to have company?’

‘I’d like Dana to stay – apparently it helps to have someone clear-headed with you if the news isn’t good.’

The doctor put the chart by her side and frowned. ‘Well, I’m afraid you’re right about it not being good news.’ She ran a hand through her fringe, looking as though what she was about to say had leached every remnant of her energy. ‘So we’ve tracked down your colonoscopy results and, as your doctor would have discussed with you, a number of polyps were found on your bowel and further testing has confirmed that those polyps are cancerous. Today’s CT scan showed that the cancer has spread to your lymph nodes and liver.’ Her eyes were bright with emotion as her hand shot across to Susan’s.

The blood drained from Susan’s face.

‘I’m afraid there’s no easy way to say this, Susan. You have stage four bowel cancer.’