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KAYAK TO KINGDOM COME

(1)

In Melbourne in 1983 an inquiry was held in a room smelling of ink and dust. A bomb had been detonated in South Yarra in the previous year, sucking glass from window frames and setting dogs howling. Fragments of the bomb, a red car, and a human body, had been collected from the scene.

Weeks had passed before the body had been identified. A consultant forensic pathologist testified that he had examined the body's remains. A fly buzzed in the room as he read from a formal police statement. He said the lower right limb and buttock showed gross damage, blackening, and blistering to the skin. The victim's height was estimated at about 175 centimetres, and his age between twenty-five and forty-five. The identification had been made by a combination of painstaking work and good luck, the inquiry was told. Two small pieces of skin had enabled the pathologist to make part of a finger and palm print. They had matched those of a person known to police. Forty-four kilograms of remains had been recovered but no major organs were found.

(2)

Marlowe, a middle-aged unsuccessful writer living near London, had reason to believe he was being watched by the police. Before leaving his bed-sitter he looked out the window, past the broken blind, down, and to each side, but saw nothing unusual. The only way out of the building was by the front door; downstairs, past his landlady's rooms, along the shadowed passage, and past the hall-stand. Only his landlady had access to the concrete backyard.

Marlowe took his time closing the heavy front door, looking both ways without turning his head. The wind gusted down the deserted street. He saw only parked vehicles, all empty.

Outside the corner shops he rang the St Johns Wood number where his Australian girl-friend, Minnie, worked as a live-in nanny. While he listened to the phone ringing he surveyed the area. The usual group of youths loitered in their usual way. An unfamiliar van was parked beyond the shops. He tried to

identify the building in which he lived but the foreshortening effect caused the uniform facades to merge into a close series of parallel lines. He couldn't tell one building from another. Nothing was changed. There was just Hackney's rubbish; dead leaves forming a sludge in the gutters, yellowing fish and chip papers frisking in the wind, the grey, neutral street, and the smell of the telephone box.

He finished eating. He had swallowed every dry mouthful believing that he maintained control by sticking to his normal habits as much as possible. He rinsed the few dishes and then put a newspaper cutting down his sock. He pulled his Black Watch tam-o-shanter tightly over his scalp and checked the time again. Spot on, he thought, and opened his door.

Three minutes later he saw the football supporters heading towards the floodlights. As he mingled with them he kept walking fast, overtaking the black and white scarves, moving around and through the crowd. When he had become part of the crowd's bulk shuffling towards the turnstiles he stuffed his tam-o-shanter into his pocket, but instead of joining the queue he continued on, pushing against the flow for several minutes. Around the arena he worked his way past the subdued hum of voices in the grandstand, then he walked more freely as the crowd thinned and the light faded. Soon he was in the small streets he knew well, anonymous in the black night, his dark clothing blending with the shadows, and his running shoes making little sound.

Liam huddled, hungry, in a sepulchral corner that smelled of damp and animals. He dreamed for minutes at a time, twitching awake repeatedly in the partial moonlight. He kept to the dark shadows and shivered, waiting for Marlowe.

Together, they had walked to this place once. They had climbed the hill with a fresh breeze and weak sunlight in their faces, talking politics. There had been advertising posters for a rock concert, or boxing. It looked different at night, deserted. The structure had been gutted by fire long ago and was now rebuilt. Part of the building appeared to be a museum. The view from Liam's elevation was extensive.

He paced, his feet and ears numb. He could see the glow of White Hart Lane, and he heard the collective roar rising and falling. He muttered to himself and spat in the direction of London twinkling in the distance. The Post Office tower loomed.

He was staring towards the city when he heard the car below. The engine and headlights were cut and Minnie got out. Liam heard the soft click of the door. He could just make her out, standing alone near the car and holding an overnight bag as if uncertain, as if she was there without faith. She stared up at Liam but it was impossible for her to see him. He was a silent shadow.

Marlowe breathed the night scents of grass and earth as he scrambled across the embankment, his heart pumping.

"Minnie?" he called softly.

She held him. He was sweating.

Liam wobbled down the slope towards them. They heard him before they saw him. They remained motionless, clinging to each other.

"Liam?" Marlowe whispered.

"I recognized you by the way you move," Liam said. "Did you bring any grub? I'm starving. And frozen."

They got in the car. Minnie drove and Liam sat on his own in the back, gulping his food. Minnie had hardly spoken, even when Liam had greeted her, so Marlowe talked.

"The first television pictures were transmitted from up there, before the war. They didn't know what they were letting themselves in for, eh?"

"What's the plan?" Liam said with his mouth full.

Marlowe reached down and pulled out the damp newspaper cutting. He passed it to him.

"What's this?"

Liam switched on the interior light, delicately unfolded the cutting, and read. Marlowe thought he looked dirty and ill in the weak light. The only sounds came from the car's engine, and the hushed noise of the distant traffic. Minnie gripped the steering-wheel as she accelerated.

(3)

Melody had to go all the way from Australia to London to track down Marlowe, her errant father, but in those days she did a lot of travelling. She hadn't seen him since he had absconded when she was a schoolgirl. She told him curiosity was her reason for looking him up.

Marlowe had been with his Irish friend, Liam, when she found him, and he had had to introduce him. Melody's life changed the moment Liam had looked at her.

Marlowe tried to put her off but she seemed determined. She knew that Liam was now in hiding, and she had made plans.

She again took the tube across the city to Marlowe's bailiwick. He was listening to his favourite piece of music — Callas singing *One Fine Day* — when she arrived wearing green boots that laced halfway up her legs and a red scarf that nearly reached her boots. Her hair was shorter than Marlowe's. He gave her a sour look.

"It's risky coming here," he said, turning to the window and peering down.

"Big deal. Why didn't you ring?"

"It's difficult. The cops ... You can't find a phone box for miles that hasn't been wrecked. I meant to."

"I'm going to Henley tomorrow, and I'm staying with Liam."

"What? You've only just met him. Look, stay out of this."

"Get with it, Marlowe."

She toyed with his typewriter. She reminded him of her mother and the recognition of this startled him. He moderated his tone.

"You can't just go any time. What if those twats Minnie nannies for want to use their cottage? I told you, Minnie's Liam's warning system. You might blunder in when they're using the place, in which case he would have scarpered until the coast's clear again."

"That's up to you and your girlfriend to sort out. You could've rung me. Because you don't have a bloody phone I've had to travel all this way to contact you. I'd rather spend the time with Liam."

"He wouldn't want you adding to the risk. What if you're followed? He doesn't need to be saddled with you."

"He wants to see me."

"No. Look ..."

"Don't get in a flap."

He thought she was determined to have the last word. Her expression mocked him. She seemed potent. He felt weak.

"We'll be extra careful, so don't get upset. We know what we're doing."

They were both silent. We, he thought, putting the kettle on.

"It's too dangerous. I don't want you mixed up with him."

"Why not? He's your mate."

Marlowe touched the kettle. It was getting hotter. He was sweating again.

"Liam's older than you. He's got problems."

She laughed.

"You don't say."

Even Marlowe smiled.

"So who doesn't have problems?"

"This is lunacy. Has he told you he's married?"

Now he had shaken her, but she counter-attacked.

"What about you? You were once. Supposed to be."

His flinch was some respite. Her poise was returning. She was about to sally again when Marlowe whispered: "Don't move." He stealthily picked up a massive dictionary next to the typewriter. He concentrated, holding the huge book horizontally at table height. Then he let it drop to the floor.

Although she had been watching him, Melody's nerves jerked. Marlowe gingerly picked the dictionary up.

"What is it?" Melody said. "A mouse? God, Marlowe! Is it dead?"

"Just stunned by all those long words."

"Kettle's boiling."

"Do you take milk?"

The conversation and the mouse had distracted him.

"Shows how much you know me, doesn't it? No thanks. I like it straight."

Walking the final leg of the trip to Liam's hideout — Minnie's employers' holiday cottage on the Thames — Melody saw pale green tips burgeoning on trees that were filled with birds. High in the sky a light aircraft buzzed.

She hesitated approaching the cottage. She noticed an elderly gardener making heavy toil of some digging. A small dog barked half-heartedly. There was nothing else. Nothing.

Liam stood back in the shadows of the doorway, smiling. Melody hadn't seen him at first because she had twisted around suddenly in reaction to birds scratching beneath a large shrub.

He kissed her cheek, taking her bag and parcels.

"I'm glad you came. I thought you might have changed your mind."

"Marlowe tried to stop me. You look like those pictures of Jesus. Jesus with short hair. You're skin and bones. You need fattening up."

They sat by the water listening to the motor of an unseen launch, and then they saw the prow emerging round a bend, slicing a steady furrow. Gulls dispersed, and Liam turned away. The gulls could have been conducting a symphony above the divided river. The wake hit the bank with a splat.

When the launch was out of sight the ripples still lapped the bank and the gulls' mewling sounded sad on the slight wind.

"Pretty posh ship," she said. "How'd you fancy being captain of that lot?"

"Too posh." Liam looked grim. "For every jumped-up Tory pretending he owns *The Britannia* there are thousands of struggling poor in both countries."

"It's not really fair, is it?"

"Property!" he almost shouted. "That's all this country amounts to — the acquisition and bloody defence of property. Nobody gives a damn about people." She supported her head with a cupped hand and listened to the music of his voice. "What makes it tragic is that so many of those who possess so little also subscribe to this philosophy. Man is inherently greedy."

He became aware of her rapt scrutiny, and smiled in self-deprecation. He stood, miming a rifleman's actions, aiming at mid-stream.

"I'd call the rebels in and blow Admiral Britannia from the water. Pow! He'd go out with a big bang, wouldn't he?"

"I'm glad the clothes fit" she said, pulling the plug out while he finished drying up. "And I've got an idea for getting you out of Britain."

He made a collar of the tea-towel by holding each end and flipping the cloth over her head, drawing her towards him.

"You're fantastic, but you shouldn't be wasting yourself on me."

He kissed her. She pressed hard against him, holding him around the waist, her wet hands on his back. They hadn't made love yet. His sexual approach was courteous and patient. She pressed her belly harder against him.

She needed a cigarette, but he didn't smoke.

Marlowe and Minnie had spent a weekend together at the cottage, with Nicholas' and Sarah's permission. Now Nicholas decided that he had earned a short holiday. As Minnie had predicted, Sarah left the organisation to her.

When they arrived Minnie hurried while they dawdled. She looked quickly at everything, but nothing was different. Oliver saw her move purposefully ahead of the others, and he tagged close behind.

"I hope this family never has to travel overseas," she said, annoyance edging her words.

"Why?"

"Because." She threw doors open, glancing in every room. "You'd never make it out of the Heathrow car-park. That's why, mister."

Everything appeared to be in order.

"I would."

"Yes. *You* would, I suppose."

"We've been to the Continent lots of times. And I'm a master, not a mister."

"Leonie?" Nicholas called in his *I've got another little job for you* tone. "Be a pet and give Sarah a hand. She's in a frightful mood. I honestly haven't done anything."

He left their bags blocking the doorway.

When Minnie poured tea Oliver asked: "Does Marlowe smoke?"

"No."

Minnie then added: "He used to, I believe."

Oliver revealed several cigarette butts in his grubby palm. Melody had smoked secretly.

"Throw them away," Sarah said. "You don't know where they've been."

Minnie demanded the butts, blaming Marlowe and apologising for having missed them when they had stayed at the cottage earlier. She whisked the butts away, foraging for anything else incriminating, any clues.

Oliver, like Minnie, was easily bored by his parents' conversation, and he soon lost interest in playing with rediscovered toys. He set off to reconnoitre territory unseen for weeks. The outbuildings attracted him.

In the main shed he paused to examine the desiccated corpse of a fly trapped by a web that was barely visible. He sniffed the dusty odour, and then moved on to the profusion of discarded items, some put aside temporarily, others forever out of favour except with the insects that bred in and under them.

"Oliver, darling? Where are you?" Sarah called.

"I'm here," he murmured.

His mother couldn't hear him. Only Liam and the blackbirds back-kicking through the detritus of silt and the previous autumn's decayed leaves piled against the shed's high side, heard him.

"Don't come to any harm."

The pebble sank the moment it hit the water. Oliver collected the flattest pebbles. He then tackled the problem with thought and energy until he succeeded in making the pebbles ricochet in slow motion arcs across the river. He wanted to paddle the kayak. Back up the slope to the shed he went.

He struggled to lift the kayak from where it had been propped upright against the wall in the shadows. His fingerprints joined others in the dust and his clothes were soon filthy. He knocked a paint tin down and lost his grip. The smooth fibreglass clattered on the concrete. He stood still, listening.

Nobody came to see what he was up to. Minnie had not actually said that he wasn't to play with the kayak. She had said he was not to take it anywhere near the river. The river was dangerous, she had said. He placed one of the dual-ended paddles where he could reach it and climbed in. He narrowed his eyes and made a rushing sound with his mouth as he rotated the paddle. He increased the rushing sound until it became a low roar deep in his throat like somebody being strangled. As he stretched his legs as far as they would go inside the shell he kicked against paper. He reached into the darkness and pulled out a newspaper cutting.

He noticed the date of the newspaper, and tried to work out the date when they had last visited the cottage.

"That was old Mr Parker, our neighbour at Henley. He said a woman telephone to warn him that somebody's staying in our cottage. He said there was something strange about the caller's voice, and she wouldn't leave her name."

Nicholas looked offended.

"You mean a squatter?"

"Yes. Parker said he doesn't want to interfere but there does seem to be someone in the cottage. He thinks this person might have been visited there by a woman. He saw them once from his garden and he didn't think they looked like our kind."

"Do you think he might be referring to Minnie and Whatshisname?"

Nicholas called Minnie from her room and said: "We've just received a funny telephone call."

She felt exposed by the awkward way they both stood watching her. She forced a grin.

"What? Heavy breathing and all that?"

"No, no. Apparently somebody's at the cottage. Our neighbour rang. Do you now anything about it?"

"No. Should I?"

She was certain they could hear the tremor in her voice. Her nervous system threatened to overload.

"It's just that we thought ... one of your friends? Marlowe, perhaps? We wanted to check with you first, before contacting the police."

"I'm sure it wouldn't be anyone I know, and certainly not Marlowe, but I'll ring him just to be sure. My address book's upstairs. I'll use the extension."

She dialled an invented number, paused, then said: "Hello. It's me. Sorry to interrupt your work but somebody rang Sarah's neighbour at Henley about an intruder at the cottage. They didn't want to call the police until I'd checked that it wasn't you."

She paused again before saying: "Yes, I imagine so."

Another pause, and: "Good. Well, I'll tell them you know nothing about it. See you later."

Nicholas and Sarah were no longer standing in the same positions when she went back downstairs.

"It's a mystery to him," she said. "He hopes everything turns out all right."

I think Marlowe was attracted to the glamour — what he perceived as glamour. That eloquent accent helped. Zealous, mad Irish. Overrated, in my opinion. And Marlowe's pathetic anti-authoritarianism contributed to the attraction. I realise that most sensible people would have refused to help, and if I had refused I could never have been implicated. But then I might have lost Marlowe, and I didn't want to work for those idiots for ever. All things come to an end. I went from being lonely and slightly bored to being scared sleepless. I still get nervous when anything unusual happens; seeing a police car, or receiving an unexpected letter that's not immediately identifiable from the envelope. Marlowe's stories get published now — under a pseudonym, a common name. Nobody would ever believe that some of the more fabulous material is real. Guilt nags me but I had to get those two out of my life. And I did help at first. We have never gone home but we often talk about going back.

The day I found the newspaper article I asked my father what a dragnet was. I also asked him the date. Children don't keep up with time the way adults do.

There was a stir over the intruder. The police were called in, and I remember how I prickled with the half-knowledge that a disturbing event had begun to unfold, when I overheard the name, Liam.

Minnie stayed behind with me while my parents drove up to inspect the cottage. I sensed that she was nervous, and when she questioned me in an oblique way I was surprised that she knew about the events referred to in the newspaper article. Her questions were those of an adult trying to take advantage of a child's underdeveloped intellect, falsely bright and casual sounding questions, but I was always half a thought ahead. I was even able to put her on the obvious defensive with questions of my own.

When my parents returned, my father, the silly duffer, repeated several times the fact that only the kayak, both paddles, and some wine had been

stolen, but what surprised me most was hearing that a book, *The Phoenix Park Murders*, had been found. Nobody knew anything about this book, but I have since read it.

The police watched out house. I saw them but they seemed uninterested in me except when I was with Minnie.

Marlowe was a small-time father, small-time writer, and small-time criminal. Maybe I should never've searched for him in the first place. He always flirted with trouble, here, and in England. I admit they were exciting days, but I was younger then. Those Bomb Squad cops were creeps. If I hadn't've played them along I don't reckon we'd've got away. Pommie men — especially cops — are so bloody arrogant they'd never credit that a little Aussie sheila could be capable of acting the sexy innocent while she bullshitted as if her life depended on it. Well, my life did depend on it in a way. I believe they even followed us to Australia but by then they were too late. That time must've been the most important time I'll ever know. I suppose I played on Marlowe's feelings. Yeah, I did. He owed me, anyway. Liam? I don't know about Liam. I loved him. I'm sure of that. He was so intense. And romantic, at first. None of the blokes I've been with since were like him. The river's a good memory. God, I had the jitters! We mightn't've made it but for my idea of using the kayak. I wanted to skite about it when we finally reached Australia. I blame Liam's brains for all his problems. And the Pommies. I still get sort of angry when I think of Marlowe's country. But it doesn't pay to spend too much time thinking. I don't suppose Marlowe's still with that mouse, Minnie.

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